アリソン

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ILLUSTRATION：KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

電撃文庫

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Design by Yoshiko Kawata

Prologue

Daytime, a certain location. The year 3256 of the World Calendar.

Why?

Why did I have to witness this?

Why me?

Why now?

I am about to murder thousands of people in the cruelest way imaginable.

Many people—husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers—

So many men will die in agony, writhing on the ground as they suffocate.

I am about to become a murderer without equal.

I anguished over this for a very long time before finally coming to terms with the fact.

I know that there is no turning back now.

So why did I have to witness something so beautiful now, of all times?

Come what may,

I must fulfill my mission.

Will anyone set foot in this place again?

Will anyone bear witness to such a wondrous sight?

Everything I'd believed in until now.

And everything I must believe in from this point forth.

Why?

Why did I have to witness this?

Why me?

Why now?

I don’t understand.

I don’t understand.

I don’t understand.

Will I ever come to understand?

I just don’t understand.

Chapter 1: Allison and Wil

The Year 3287 of the World Calendar. Early summer.

The sky was a clear azure. The smooth earth was covered in green.

In the distance loomed the Central Mountain Range. Some of its great peaks were still capped with snow.

When the winds began to blow in from the south, summer would arrive upon this land in full force.

There was a boy sitting on the grass, with his back against the red brick of the school building.

He had light brown hair and brown eyes. He was of average height and build, and was wearing a summer uniform—a white button-up shirt and a pair of navy pants. The little badge on his collar identified the boy as a fifth-year student at Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School. If he hadn't skipped a grade, he would be either sixteen or seventeen. He didn't look old enough to have failed two semesters in a row—in other words, held back a year.

The boy leisurely produced a book from the bag next to him. The book was small, but considerably thick. The school library's mark was stamped on the back cover.

He turned to the page he had bookmarked. But he paused before he began reading. He slowly looked up. The sun shone brilliantly upon the boy and the open book.

He closed the book, put it back into his bag, and stood. Taking about fifty steps towards the trees, he sat down under the shade of a full green branch.

Once again, he took out the book and opened it.

He began to read.

Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School was situated between farmlands and plains.

The grounds, large enough to fit a small village, were surrounded by coniferous trees. Five sturdy school buildings, made of red bricks, stood in a line. Around these buildings were a staff building, an indoor gymnasium, and a kitchen for making school lunches, among others. Also on the unnecessarily expansive grounds were a large running track, a field for ball games, a grove of trees, a small patch of farmland for educational purposes, and a wide-open area dotted with giant trees.

This facility was originally an army post used by the cavalry. But it was sold to the ministry of education twenty-four years ago and converted into a school. Now, it was the most famous secondary school in the area—a facility educating approximately a thousand students between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

It was just when the boy had flipped through about five pages. The door on the side of the school building opened, and about a dozen students wearing first-year badges spilled outside in an excited chatter. Following after them was a tall, middle-aged teacher holding a portable blackboard under his arm.

The boy looked up. The first-years approached him, still chattering. Some seemed surprised to see him, while others did not seem to care.

Soon, the teacher spotted him and stopped.

"I see you're reading something interesting, Wil."

The boy—Wilhelm Schultz—looked up, greeted the teacher, and nodded.

The teacher asked Wil about the book. Wil hesitated for a moment before showing him the cover. The teacher chuckled wryly.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to tell me what it says, Wil."

"It's a book of children's stories, sir."

"Children's stories?"

"Yes. It's a collection of stories from the West. A lot of them are known here, too, but some of the stories have completely different endings." Wil answered. The teacher shrugged.

"I had no idea we had books like this in the library."

"Were you giving remedial lessons to the first-years, sir?"

"That's right. It's only the first term, but they're so full of energy. They're still stuck in primary school mode. Ah, that reminds me. Why don't you join us, Wil? We're studying history today. I'm sure you'd be a wonderful teacher. And I'm sure I could get some well-deserved sleep." The teacher joked.

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline, sir." Wil laughed, shaking his head.

The students decided on a spot three trees away, and called their teacher over. The teacher said goodbye to Wil and returned to the waiting first-years. He then set up the blackboard on the ground.

"Sir, is that upperclassman staying back for remedial classes, too?" One of the first-years asked quietly so Wil wouldn't hear. The other students laughed.

It had been three days since the beginning of summer break. The students at Lowe Sneum Memorial had gone back home for the first time in half a year. The only ones who remained were those students whose marks were so low that they needed to take remedial classes, kept behind at school for about ten more days.

"No, that's not it." The teacher said, shaking his head.

"Was he the one who was at the festival?" One of the students asked.

"That's right. And his marks are actually not bad at all. In fact, with his academic record, he could probably skip a grade."

"Oh. So why's he here?" Another student asked.

A shadow passed over the teacher's face. Without answering his pupil's question, he picked up a chalk and drew a large potato shape on the board.

"Let's begin the lesson, everyone. Make sure to pay attention, or you'll have to wait a *very* long time to eat your mother's home cooking. We'll start with geography."

It was the shape of a potato—a circle slightly stretched out horizontally.

This was the shape of the only continent on this planet. The drawing on the board soon began to grow more and more like the image of the map of the world, accurate perspective and all. The lower tip of the potato was skirting the equator. The upper tip was jutting just past 60° N.

The teacher began to draw mountain symbols at the bottom of the center of the oval. He slowly moved upwards, stopping about midway. He then drew two parallel lines on either side of the mountain range. The lines connected at the top of the range, and continued north until they hit the ocean at the top.

"Let's start with a review. Sorry for the awful drawing. The mountains here are the Central Mountain Range. The lines are the Lutoni River."

The continent was bisected by the river and the mountain range.

The Central Mountain Range was the longest and largest mountain range in the world, with several peaks that stood over ten thousand meters tall. The mountain range started at the very bottom of the continent, and reached straight up to 30° N. In other words, it ended at about the center of the continent.

It was here that the Lutoni River took over as the border. The East and West Lutoni Rivers, running parallel to each other on either side of the mountain range, converged and widened, swallowing countless tributaries along the way. The river flowed in a nearly-straight line towards the ocean in the north.

What is the name of the nation on this side?" The teacher asked, indicating at the eastern side of the perfectly bisected map.

"Roxche, sir." One student answered immediately. The teacher asked for the official name. A girl spoke up.

"The Roxcheanuk Confederation. The nation we live in."

"Correct. It's a bit of a mouthful, but it's important to remember our official name." The teacher said, labeling the east side 'Roxche'.

Some of the students complained about the teacher using the short form, but the teacher replied that he had no room to write the full name on his diagram. He then pointed at the western side.

ロクシュ
ルート河
スーベー・イル

“What about this side?”

“The Evil Empire!” One of the students cried out jokingly. The others burst into laughter.

“Yes, some people call it that. But what about its official name and shortened name?”

The mischievous student could not answer. Another student spoke up.

“The Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, sir. Sou Be-Il for short.”

“Excellent. And just to warn you—if I see ‘Evil Empire’ on any of your tests, I will penalize you. Now, there’s another, unofficial word we use to refer to Sou Be-Il. Can someone tell me?”

“Cross-River!” Several students answered at once.

“Yes. They are across the Lutoni River, so we call them ‘Cross-River’. Simple. Now, do you know what the people Cross-River call Roxche?” The teacher asked. This time, no one could answer him. Several nonsense answers were suggested, before the students finally went quiet.

“Cross-River.” Wil whispered the answer to himself, reading his book.

“Just like all of you have come from many different countries, Roxche is made up of sixteen countries and territories on the eastern side of the continent. Sou Be-Il is made up of the two large kingdoms on the western side, along with several small countries. In primary school, you’ve probably only been taught the history of Roxche. But our relationship with Cross-River becomes important now.”

“Is it about the war?” A student asked. The teacher nodded.

“Yes. That’s right.”

The history of the relationship between Roxche and Sou Be-Il was synonymous with the history of warfare.

In the distant past, when civilization was in its infancy, the World Calendar was still in its first digit. East and West were isolated from each other, cut off by the mountain range and the river. They were essentially two different worlds.

Eventually, civilizations grew mature, and countries were created. And after countless battles and wars, East and West were each united into an empire. Wars between countries turned into wars between the two empires. It was recorded in history books from the distant past that dozens of great wars were fought between the empires of the East and West.

To attack and annihilate the land across the river soon became the goal of both empires. But geography made dust of these ambitions. They had crossed the river and claimed territory on the other side for short periods of time, but they were quickly driven back across.

Nearly a thousand years passed. The great empires, which had been unified powers, scattered into countless small countries. For centuries these small countries of the East and West crumbled and revived over and over again.

With the Middle Ages came the era of kings and knights. Approximately four hundred years ago, the kingdoms of the West forged an alliance. And in order to fulfill the ambitions of the emperors of old, they attacked the troubled East, which was still in the midst of a civil war.

The East put a temporary hold to the in-fighting and united against their loathed common enemy. With the Lutoni river in the center, a long, monotonous century of back-and-forth battles were fought. Afterwards, a frightening pandemic spread across the world, putting a hazy end to the war. The border drawn down the Lutoni river was never changed.

Even in relatively modern times, when firearms were first deployed, the back-and-forth over the river continued. In the midst of the battles, both sides reached the same conclusion.

'What if the countries Cross-River join forces for one massive invasion?'

And so, at the same time, for the same reasons, East and West chose unification. The ancient empires had been revived as a confederation and an alliance respectively.

And so, a cold war began.

"The cold war lasted for 130 years before it became openly hostile. War broke out between Roxche and Sou Be-Il. This was the Great War. Can someone tell me what year it started?"

"3252, sir. Exactly thirty-five years ago."

"That's correct. This was the first and largest war fought between the two nations in contemporary times. The main area of conflict was…"

The teacher drew several 'x's around the mouth of the Lutoni River.

"The north. Near the country of Lor and the Republic of Niasham. This is where the river widens and leads into the ocean. It was a constant battle over the vicinity of the river. Countless people were killed, and many lost their homes. But in '56, the Sou Be-Il military caught us off-guard by invading a point that was further to the south. Can anyone tell me where?"

The students did not answer. The teacher drew a circle near the point where the rivers converged and the mountain range ended.

"The Neit region in the Republic of Raputoa. In other words, this very area." The teacher said, pointing at the ground. "This very place we're sitting in. The area around our school was a key location at the time. There was one very clever Sou Be-Il general, you see. He realized that the weak link in the Roxche line of defense was this area, where the mountain range ends and many rivers crisscross the land in complex patterns. So he pretended to launch an attack on the north, while instead attacking Neit. He was going to cross the river and take over with one great push, using this area as the foundation for more invasions."

The students listened without so much as a word. Some of the boys, who knew how the story went, listened excitedly.

"We were taken by surprise. We were panicking. At the time, we didn't have the kind of forces we needed to fight off such a large-scale invasion. After all, everyone was busy fighting up north. The way things were going, both Raputoa and our neighbor Kerena would

be conquered in a moment's notice. Then, the Roxchean forces fighting in the north would be attacked even from the south. Everyone desperately tried to think of a way to stop the general's forces. But we just didn't have enough soldiers, and there was no time to call for reinforcements. That was when one man gave us a miracle."

The teacher's story continued.

"Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan. With just about a dozen men under his command, the lieutenant colonel snuck into the enemy base in the dead of night. That's where he got them with poison gas. Anyone who took so much as a whiff died. The enemy general, his subordinates—all of them were killed. The enemy had no choice but to retreat. For years afterwards, this attack was condemned as being an inhumane act on Roxche's part. But if that attack had never succeeded, there would have been many more casualties—both on our side and theirs. Roxche might even have lost the war. At the time, I was younger than you all are now. But I still remember it like it was yesterday. I remember thinking to myself, 'Oh. Roxche isn't going to lose now'."

"What happened that amazing man, sir?" One of the boys asked.

"Of course, Lieutenant Colonel McMillan became a hero. But all of his men were killed in the battle. He was the only one to make it back alive. Afterwards, he refused all medals and promotions, and retired. He went back to his hometown to live in peace. I'm not sure if he's even alive anymore."

"Whaaaat."

"Huh."

"Cool."

"An armistice was signed in the year 3257. But an armistice is different from a termination of hostilities. To be specific, Roxche and Sou Be-Il are technically still at war. Fifteen years ago—that would be in 3272, there was a skirmish in the North Sea that ended very quickly. But the Lestki Island Conflict ten years ago lasted an entire year. You all must have been about two at the time, so I suppose you wouldn't remember."

The teacher drew a close-up of a section of the Lutoni River and drew in the middle a long, thin island.

"Now, the conflict was over sovereignty of Lestki Island. This particular battle was only fought on the island and the surrounding areas. It lasted for an entire year, but in the end, it was decided that neither Roxche nor Sou Be-Il would possess this land. This was an incredible development. Until that point, the border between the nations was considered the middle of the Lutoni River, but after this conflict, the river and the thirty-kilometer area adjacent to its banks became demilitarized. This is called a buffer zone. It's a sort of cushion that prevents us from bumping into one another. And this buffer zone still exists today. Only fishermen who've received special permission are allowed to approach the river. And so, we're spared the risk of battle breaking out over unforeseen accidents."

The teacher took out his pocket watch and glanced at it. Then, he continued.

"There was another historical development concerning the Lestki Island Conflict. This is actually material for later years, but since I'm on the topic, let me tell you. This battle marks the first use of aeroplanes in battle. The first instance of manned flight was twenty

years before the conflict—in other words, in the direct aftermath of the Great War. At the time, of course, no one thought we could use aeroplanes for war. But they slowly grew more and more advanced, and played a critical role during the Lestki Island Conflict. They acted as scouts, bombers, and fighter planes that took down enemy aircraft. And from now on, they'll play even more important roles in battle. Having more aeroplanes might become better than having more cannons. Warfare itself could undergo a complete paradigm shift."

Wil looked up and glanced at the teacher. Then, he returned to his book.

"There hasn't been a single war between Roxche and Sou Be-Il in the last ten years, and trade between the two nations is becoming steadily more frequent. So I suppose you could call this peacetime. But you never know what's going to happen. It's impossible for Roxche and Sou Be-Il to get along, you see, so it wouldn't be strange for war to break out at any time. Don't forget. We always have to be prepared in case they invade us. We have to be ready to defend our nation. This is why everyone is conscripted at age eighteen."

"Why can't we get along? I mean, I wish we could be friends, just like our class." One of the girls asked.

"Excellent question. And it's certainly a good thing for you to get along with your classmates. You mustn't hate or despise others. But Roxche and Cross-River can never get along."

The teacher said firmly to the many sets of eyes fixated upon him,

"This is because both sides claim that their ancestors were the ancestors of humanity. In the Two Empires Era, both sides believed that humans were made by God. They believed that they were the first humans to be created, and that they were the ancestors of all people. This was why East and West could never get along on equal terms. That line of thought continued into the Middle Ages."

The teacher stopped for breath, and continued.

"But recently, research has shown that, in the distant past, humans evolved from monkeys. I'm sure all of you have seen that diagram of the little monkey slowly walking on two legs and becoming a human."

The students nodded.

"In that case, even if people weren't made by God, from which side did the first humans emerge? Which side had the longest history? Which side were the ancestors from? That's what everyone began to wonder. And both sides claim to be the ancestors. You'll learn much more about this topic in your third year."

"Which one do *you* think is right, sir?"

"Hm?"

"Where do you think the ancestors of humans came from? Roxche, or Sou Be-Il?"

The teacher was silent for about five seconds. Then, he said firmly,

"Of course they came from Roxche. After all, it's objective truth that we're much more developed in many aspects. We have a larger population, and we have fewer poor countries

and territories. This means that so many more people are living good lives here in Roxche. And historically speaking, the greatest artists and inventors were mostly Roxchean. We must be proud of the fact that we're from the East. Never forget that we, and our ancestors, are superior to those mistaken people from Cross-River. This is what you're here to learn, and this is what we teachers are here to teach."

The teacher's voice was carried on the wind to Wil as he remained glued to his book. He moved once during his reading to follow the shade of the tree as it shifted under the sun.

There was a light breeze. His hair shook. At the same time, Wil heard the low-pitched hum of an insect at his left ear. He waved his hand to drive it away.

"?"

But the hum did not cease. Wil placed a bookmark on the page he was reading and stood. He then stepped out of the shade and looked up at the sky.

"Sir, over there!" One of the first-years cried, spotting the source of the sound. The students looked up into the sky all at once.

There were two small aeroplanes in the air. Propellers were spinning at their noses, and they had two wings—one atop and one underneath the fuselage. Jutting out from the lower wings were sturdy sets of landing gear.

The two planes flew side-by-side at low altitude against the backdrop of the blue sky, the rhythmic hum of their engines drawing nearer as they skirted the school grounds.

"Wow! Real aeroplanes!"

The first-years broke out into excited chatter once more. Although aeroplanes were now being used for civilian travel and transport purposes between the larger cities, not many people had yet seen one in person. The teacher and the students put a temporary hold on their outdoor lesson to leave the shade of the tree and look up at the approaching aircrafts.

"Look at the frame, everyone. See the emblem with the Spear of Seron? Those aeroplanes belong to the Roxchean Air Force." The teacher said, brimming with excitement. Just as he said, there was an emblem with a spear on the left side of the fuselage.

The spear was black, and had a pointed tip like an arrowhead. There was a thicker section at the top of the shaft, which was presumably the grip of the spear. And on either side of the very top were red markings that looked like an arrow's fletches.

The Spear of Seron, the official crest of the Roxcheanuk Confederation.

It was an ancient motif that had been carved onto pottery and the like from antiquity. During the Two Empires Era, the spear—then known as a demon-slaying spear—was used as the crest of the emperors. The motif survived the fall of the empire, and was carved and painted onto the middle of shields and flags borne by kings and knights in the ages that followed. After the establishment of Roxche, it was placed on the upper-left corner of the Roxchean national flag as a symbol of unity.

"The air force…" Wil muttered to himself.

The two aeroplanes continued their slow approach, as though parading the two spears to the students. Each plane had two seats, both exposed to the air. And at the pilot's seats could be seen pilots wearing aviator hats.

The first-years waved energetically at the planes. As though in response, one of the aeroplanes moved its flaps. The second plane followed suit. At this point, students were practically hanging out of some of the classroom windows for a look at this unusual sight.

The hum of the engines soon grew quiet. The two planes flew over the running track, showing the left sides of their tails, and—did not disappear from view.

The aeroplane that had first greeted the students suddenly made a sharp left turn. The top of its fuselage was clearly visible from the ground as it swerved in the direction of the students. It then began to descend and move faster.

Right in front of Wil, the students, and the red brick building, the plane swerved ninety degrees to the left. It passed between the students and the building at extremely low altitude, angled as though about to make a landing on the school wall. Several girls screamed, spooked by the roar of the engine. The students who were looking out the windows quickly drew back for fear of being run over.

The two pilots sitting in the plane were clearly visible to Wil and the students. They were wearing brown aviator hats, goggles, and mufflers over their faces.

The first-years let out shouts of shock and excitement.

"I was so sure they would crash… What an incredible show of acrobatics." The teacher gasped.

The plane once more swerved sharply to the left. It then oriented itself towards Wil and the others from the end of the running track.

This time, however, it began to descend and slow. The aeroplane landed square in the middle of the track, sending dust flying everywhere. It continued to cruise along the ground.

"It landed! It landed!"

"Let's go!"

"This is awesome!"

"C'mon!"

The first-years cried out eagerly.

"No, everyone! Wait! You could die if you get caught in the propellers!" The teacher shouted anxiously, scolding the students who were already running for the plane. "So don't get there before I do, you hear?!"

With that, the teacher briskly walked over to the aeroplane.

Wil hesitated for a moment, before following the teacher at his usual pace. When he glanced back, he saw a dozen or so boys running out of the building. One of them came up to Wil

and lightly punched him on the shoulder. It was Wil's classmate, a boy who was unfortunately taking remedial classes to improve his dismal marks.

"Did you see that, Wil?! Real aeroplanes! From the Roxchean Air Force! And one landed right on the grounds!"

"Yeah, it's amazing… Hey, what about remedial classes?"

"As if anyone's gonna pay attention now. C'mon! Let's go take a look!"

With that, he pushed Wil forward. Wil had no choice but to run now.

The aeroplane had come to a complete stop. Even its engine had been shut off.

A well-built pilot—a man of about thirty—stood there with his arms spread out, as though telling the first-years to stay back. He was wearing a grey set of coveralls and a pair of military boots. He was also wearing a leather jacket, on the left arm of which was emblazoned the crest with the Spear of Seron, the mark of the Roxche military. On either side of his collar was his badge of rank.

All the students told the pilot how much they admired him and the aeroplane. The man put on an embarrassed grin. The second plane leisurely circled the sky overhead.

By the time Wil had approached the plane, the teacher was showering the pilot with questions. Was this an emergency landing? No. Was this part of some training mission? No. Was this part of a secret air force mission? Of course not.

Soon, the other pilot, who had been fiddling with something at the pilot's seat, approached the first pilot with a small suitcase in hand. The second pilot had a small build, and was also wearing grey coveralls and a jacket, topped with a thick aviator hat, a pair of goggles, and a muffler.

The two pilots exchanged words before standing up straight and saluting one another. The larger of the two returned to the plane. He climbed up the fuselage and took the back seat. Then, he put on his hat and goggles and pulled the muffler over his mouth.

The engine came to life with an explosive noise. It was quickly followed by the sound of the propeller spinning.

The aeroplane began to move as though gliding, swerving left and doing a 180 in an instant. The students could no longer help but turn their backs on the dust cloud kicked up by the propeller.

The plane began to cruise along the field, and quickly took off into the air.

As the students watched in awe, the aeroplane joined its companion in the air, and the two flew off into the distance in formation.

The dust settled, and the grounds were quiet once more. Only the smaller of the pilots was left standing there.

Naturally, all eyes were on this pilot. The pilot took off their hat and goggles, and pulled down their muffler.

A small commotion broke out among the people on the field.

The pilot was a woman. A girl not yet twenty, who would not be out of place among the students of Lowe Sneum Memorial. She had a small build and pleasant features, with large blue eyes. Her long, straight hair shone a brilliant blond.

"Whoa… She can't be from Cross-River, can she?" Wil's friend whispered. The combination of blue eyes and blond hair was almost unheard of in these parts. Most people had black, brown, or chestnut hair, with grey, brown, or green eyes. This girl's coloring was more common, but still extremely rare, in colder areas like parts of northeastern Roxche. However, the residents of the capital of Sou Be-Il—the city of Sfrestus in the northern region—were also said to have blond hair and blue eyes.

The girl slapped the dust off her jacket and pulled out her long hair from under it. It fell down all the way to her back. She tied it into a ponytail at her neck.

"B, but… she can't be an enemy, right? She's in the air force…" Wil's friend said. At that very moment, the girl looked in their direction. She placed her hat atop her suitcase and walked straight towards them. The first-years cleared the way for her without a word. The teacher made to speak to her as she passed him by, but he lost his chance. Wil's friend grabbed Wil by the sleeve and asked in a panicked tone,

"Did I… say something insulting just now? Yes? She's not gonna shoot me, is she?"

But the girl stopped in front of Wil, and looked into his face. Wil was very slightly taller than her. His friend let go of his sleeve and staggered backwards.

Wil looked at the girl. The girl slowly smiled and said gently,

"It's been a long time, Wil. How are you?"

"Allison?" Wil asked.

"The one and only."

The girl—Allison Whittington—nodded with a grin.

"What, were you expecting someone else?"

* * *

Like other secondary schools, Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School operated on a dormitory system. But the dorms, in this case, were not located on the school grounds. Instead, they were in the nearest settlement in the area—the town of Makkaniu. Of course, it was still fifteen kilometers away from the school. This was because, when the school was first founded, the townspeople feared that they would not profit in any way from the school and demanded that the dorms be located there. The students commuted to their classes via school buses operated by the town's bus company.

During the school year, school buses ran frequently all day long in time with the school schedule. But fewer buses ran during the breaks, when the remedial classes were in

session. Once the remedial classes were finished, bus service to and from the school was cut altogether.

Students and staff who remained in the dorms and went to the school building during the breaks were allowed to borrow motorcycles equipped with sidecars, or bicycles. Of course, not everyone could borrow the former. Only students past their third year with good grades who had taken driving lessons were allowed to use them.

About four kilometers south of the school was a lake and a wetland.

Groundwater from the Central Mountain Range created a lake in a large hollow in the plains, which was surrounded by a marsh.

Allison and Wil were sitting on a low hill, from where they could see the entire marsh. Wil was wearing a light summer jacket over his button-up shirt, and Allison was in a comfortable pair of pants and a thick shirt.

“Yeah, this is the place. I thought it looked really beautiful when I was passing overhead.” Allison said as she looked down at the landscape. She then turned to Wil.

“Do you come here a lot?”

Wil shook his head.

“Not really. Maybe because it’s too close to the school.”

Behind the two of them stood one of the school’s sidecar-equipped motorcycles.

Two seats were on the motorcycle, one behind the other, and the sidecar was attached to the right side of the motorcycle. On the sidecar, composed of a simple seat and a handle, was the crest of the school administration and the vehicle registration number.

“You came so suddenly… I was really surprised.” Wil said. When his friend and the teacher realized that Wil and the pilot knew each other, they bombarded him with one question after another. Wil managed to worm his way out with vague answers, and as Allison changed out of her coveralls in the infirmary, he signed out a school motorcycle. They left the school as though in escape.

“Really? But I wrote saying I’d come see you sometime during your summer break. And you said you were just going to stay at the dorms since you didn’t really want to go anywhere. I can stay at the dorms even though I’m not a student, right?”

“Yeah, but—I mean, sure, you can stay at the dorms—but I didn’t think you’d arrive on an air force aeroplane. I was expecting you to come by train. I was going to come pick you up at the station once you sent me a telegram. How’d you arrange for the ride?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was a special reward for good workplace behavior?”

“No.”

“…Remember I wrote to you before saying I was placed into a unit that transports aeroplanes?”

“Yeah. Last fall.”

"I was deployed on a mission to transport these new practice planes from the factory to Kinani. We were going to pass by Neit on the way, so I decided to take a few days off."

"I see. So you got a lift all the way here."

"Actually, I *flew* it all the way here. Although we were delayed two days because of some awful weather."

"So you really can pilot those machines and fly through the air, Allison… That's amazing."

"Wasn't it awesome how I just skirted over the school before? The first lieutenant on board with me told me to stop it, though."

"That's just like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Allison said, sounding slightly angry. Then, her tone dropped.

"Are things going well with you, Wil?"

"More or less. I'm just going to school, reading books at the library during the breaks and stuff. Things are pretty relaxed here. What about you, Allison?"

"I guess it's going well… or not. It's not great. I'm flying almost every day. Sure, that's fun. But no matter what I do, they just won't let me on a fighter plane."

"Didn't you write saying you were on one not too long ago?"

"Yeah, but that was just for a little bit on a transportation mission. I mean, I got to *pilot* it all I wanted. But what I'm saying is that they won't transfer me to a combat unit. For stupid reasons like 'Because you're too young', or 'Because you're a girl'."

"Oh… I see." Wil said.

At that moment, a waterfowl skidded across the surface of the lake and flew into the air. Allison and Wil watched it together. And suddenly, they looked at one another.

"…"

"…"

For some time, they stood there in silence.

Then, Allison said in a slightly annoyed tone,

"Don't you have *anything* to say? We haven't seen each other in half a year."

"Um… Not really. What about you, Allison?" Wil asked.

"…Hm…"

Allison was lost for words. She stared blankly into the air for a moment.

"Oh! Something funny happened to me the other day. I couldn't wait to tell you!" She said suddenly, amused. She then stuck up her index finger at Wil.

"The other day, I got a love letter!"

"Oh."

"'Oh'? That's it?" Allison glared.

"No, well…"

This time, it was Wil's turn to stare blankly into the air.

"But it's a funny story, so I'll tell you the rest. You won't believe this—the letter was from a man from Cross-River."

The term 'Cross-River' shocked Wil. His gaze returned to Allison. She looked at him, entertained by his reaction. Their eyes met.

"How did that happen?" Wil said without an ounce of humor.

"Did you hear about the joint rescue training the Roxchean Air Force did with Sou Be-Il about two weeks ago?"

Wil nodded.

"I heard about it on the radio. And I read about it in the papers, too. Apparently it was the first time both armies were involved in something where there weren't any casualties. It was written in a really sarcastic tone."

"Yeah. We were training to use seaplanes to rescue sailors from the water. It was on an island in a wide section of the Lutoni River buffer zone. Officially, it was supposed to be because of that recent fishing agreement they signed. Since more fishing ships are going to go out into the river now, we were supposed to be jointly deciding on methods of communication, emergency signals, and rules in case some of those fishermen end up in an accident. Trying to prevent battle from breaking out from misunderstandings, you know? But really, both sides were actually trying to figure out ways to save allied pilots who end up making an emergency landing in the river. But since both forces are in a honeymoon period, they went through with the joint training. Some people from our unit transported the aeroplanes, and I begged them to let me join in, too. That's when this young second lieutenant from Sou Be-Il suddenly came up to me and started talking in broken Roxchean."

"Really?

"This is the first thing he said. 'Good day. Are you the daughter of Colonel Rosemeitz?'. Oh, Colonel Rosemeitz is our commander. It's like he thought this was some sort of a vacation. He brought his family to the village nearby! I got so mad, I ended up half-lying and told the guy, 'No, I'm a pilot'."

"And then?"

"Then he got all impressed and apologized, and then asked me out to tea. Although really, the closest thing to a cafe they had was a table and a couple of chairs set up under a tarp."

"Then what happened?"

"I thought it might be interesting, so I followed him. The soldiers from Cross-River were all looking at me, and I had a lot of fun talking about aeroplanes with him. That was all. But four days after the training session, he sent me a letter addressed to our unit's captain. Apparently he wanted to court me officially and exchange letters with me."

"…They inspected that letter before you got it, right?"

"Definitely. But it got to me properly. My unit wouldn't stop talking about it for a while. About how brave that officer from Cross-River was or something. But I ended up writing to him to politely decline. He was pretty cool, though."

"…"

Wil said nothing.

"Surprised?" Allison asked, sounding a little proud.

"I am. I'm really shocked. And… I'm honestly amazed. It really is a surprise." Wil replied, looking at Allison.

"Right?" Allison said, flicking her golden hair. But Wil's thoughts lay someplace different.

"You've gone really far, huh…"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The relationship between the two forces. It's surprising enough that they're interacting at all, but I had no idea soldiers were free to talk, and even write to one another like that. Allison… you should have at least asked to keep exchanging letters with—Ouch."

Allison punched him.

* * *

On the motorcycle, Wil and Allison were going down a path that cut straight through a farm. The path was a level higher than the field around it, but it was a dirt road that had not been paved.

Allison was sitting in the sidecar, lazily watching the scenery pass them by. The crops growing in the fields, the horizon, and the peaks of the Central Mountain Range in the distance.

Wil slowed down in the middle of the path. He kept his eyes forward as he mentioned to Allison,

"Oh, I went to Kaashi last month."

"Last month? You went to the festival?"

Allison looked at Wil. He nodded.

"I'm jealous. Did you have fun?"

"Actually… I wasn't there to play. I was part of the Shooting Competition."

"You were? Really?!" Allison asked, surprised. Wil responded matter-of-factly as he continued to drive.

"Back in spring semester, one of my friends recommended the shooting experience class to me. It's part of the military sciences officers' program. I thought it might be fun, since I'd never used a gun before. Then they suddenly said that I have a knack for shooting, and dragged me into the shooting club. I didn't really mind it, but then they told me to enter the Kaashi Competition as the school representative. Thanks to that, I ended up having to deal with an upset upperclassman who just graduated recently."

"That's not surprising. Every shooting club in Raputoa lives to fire a shot in front of everyone at that competition." Allison said. Her tone then brightened. "So how'd you do? Did you win anything?"

"I was sixth place." Wil said quietly.

"What?! Sixth place?!" Allison gasped, taking to her feet. Wil glanced up at her.

"Don't stand up, Allison. It's dangerous. Anyway, I don't know if it was just a coincidence or if I was just in really good condition that day. I was so nervous that it all went by before I knew it. But everyone congratulated me, and that upperclassman I told you about was back in high spirits… It was a lot of fun."

Allison slowly sat back down.

"It really must have been. I'm really surprised, Wil. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Because it might have sounded like I was showing off." Wil said quietly. Allison pointed accusingly at him.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Wil?! You should be more proud of yourself. A little bit of showing off is nothing to be ashamed of!"

She then spread her arms and raised them to the sky.

"But then again, I guess that's just not you. It's all right. From now on, *I'll* show off *for* you. I'll tell everyone, 'Wil here placed sixth in the 3287 Kaashi Shooting Competition'! Okay?"

Wil smiled, his expression a cross between embarrassment and self-deprecation.

"Maybe you've really got a talent for shooting, Wil. They say that the calm ones are usually the best marksmen."

"Including you, I've heard the same thing from twenty-seven people, Allison."

"Were you counting?" Allison asked.

"No. I just remember." Wil replied matter-of-factly.

“I’m so jealous, Wil. When we were learning to shoot handguns in the military, I couldn’t even hit a watermelon from five meters away. The captain said, ‘If we put you on a fighter plane, you’d only waste your bullets’ with this really astonished face. But you know, shooting with a gun in hand is completely different from shooting from an aeroplane! Isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t tell you, Allison…”

As the narrow path neared an irrigation canal, it gave way to a bridge.

An elderly man sat on the railings of the stone bridge, looking into the sky. Sticking up underneath the skies were the peaks of the Central Mountain Range.

The old man was probably well past seventy. He had gone mostly bald, and even the remaining hairs on his head were completely white. He wore a patched-up checkered shirt with a set of overalls commonly worn by farmers.

The old man looked at the motorcycle as it approached from a distance.

“Oh, it’s him.” Wil said, looking at the old man waving his hand on the path ahead. He lowered the gear and slowed down.

“Do you know him?”

“Sort of. Everyone in our school knows about him. He lives by himself at the edge of town, but nobody knows what he does. He’s always wandering the village or the plains, and sometimes he stops students on their way and talks about the strangest things.”

“Like what?”

“All kinds of stuff. About how he was once a royal butler, how he owns a diamond mine, how he used to be the captain of a luxury cruise liner, how he’s a famous author, or how he’s a prolific inventor…”

“Huh.”

“My upperclassman says… he probably escaped from some hospital. Everyone at school just calls him ‘The Lying Old Man’.”

“Huh.”

“He’s probably going to ask for a ride home. He asked me once before, too.”

Wil stopped the motorcycle just before the old man, who stood waving in the middle of the path. The latter ran up to Allison and Wil with surprising speed for a man of his age.

“Hello there! You’re the clever young man from the secondary school. And what’s this? A beautiful young lady with golden hair. I’m sorry to bother you, but could you spare some time to take me back home? I was just out on walk, you see, but I suddenly felt very tired. My house is very close—just down there. I promise I won’t get in the way of your date. And if you’d like, you can stop by at my house for a short rest.”

Wil looked around. There was nothing but plains all around them. He turned to Allison for her opinion. She had already climbed out of the sidecar.

“Here you are.” She said, offering her seat to the old man.

“Ah, thank you.”

The old man sat in the sidecar, and Allison sat behind Wil.

“Is this all right?” Wil asked, looking back at her.

“You were going to give him a ride anyway, weren’t you? You’d never turn down someone’s request, Wil. And besides…” She smiled, “he even gave you a compliment.”

‘Just down there’ turned out to be a full ten kilometers from the bridge.

They diverged from the street where the buses ran and rode through a narrow road that no one seemed to have used. Soon, they spotted a house surrounded by several trees. It was a little red house made of brick. So small was the building that it probably contained only the bare essentials, and did not even receive electricity.

Propped up in front of the well was a little motorcycle that looked rather like a bicycle equipped with an engine. Wil parked the school motorcycle next to it and shut off the ignition.

“I’m very grateful. Thank you. And you drove so carefully, too. I’m impressed.” The old man said, climbing out of the sidecar. At that moment, a woman wearing a navy skirt and an apron ran out of the house towards them. She was the housekeeper, in her late forties.

“Sir! Where have you been all this time?!” She cried, pulling off her apron. “You’re always wandering off and driving me up the wall! Try to be more considerate—don’t go out so far that you can’t come back alone! Now I won’t have time to go get the groceries!”

“I’m very sorry.” The old man said, not sounding apologetic in the least. “Ah, this young man and his friend gave me a ride back. Young man, young lady, this here is my fussy housekeeper.”

“You don’t have to call me fussy, sir. I’m going to go into town for a bit. If you’d like to serve the students some tea, everything should be in order inside. You can do that much on your own.” The housekeeper said, climbing onto the small motorcycle and starting the engine.

“Take care.” The old man said. The woman looked up at the man in shock.

“I will.”

With that quiet answer, the woman departed on the motorcycle. And the old man offered Wil and Allison some tea.

“Since we’re here, let’s take a load off and have a relaxing cup of tea. We don’t have anything to do, anyway.” Allison said, stepping inside first. Wil followed after her.

When they opened the door, they saw three chairs around a small table. Against the wall stood an old sofa. In the middle of the room was a fireplace, steam rising from above it. Prepared on the shelf was a teapot, some cups, and a container filled with tea leaves.

“Take a seat, both of you. I’ll have the tea ready soon.” The old man said, expertly brewing the tea and bringing it to the table. Allison and Wil thanked him and accepted the cups.

The old man poured himself some tea as well and took a seat.

“Ah, yes. There’s nothing like a cup of tea after a long, tiring day.” He said with a smile.

“This is great! I’ve never had such good tea before!” Allison said after a single sip.

“It’s delicious.” Wil agreed, nodding.

The old man clapped his hands together.

“I’m glad to hear that. This tea’s usually only served to members of the Royal Family of Staatz. Most commoners never even get to drink a sip, but they made a special exception for me because I worked at their summer palace as a gardener when I was young.”

“That sounds wonderful. By the way, is this another one of your lies?” Allison asked. Wil choked on his tea.

“Allison…”

“But…”

“Haha! You caught me, young lady. I’m sorry, but I have nothing to do with the royal family. And on that note, I’ve never worked as a gardener before.” The old man said jovially, not sounding sorry at all.

“I knew it.” Allison said, sounding just as cheerful. Wil turned to the old man.

“Last time I came here with my upperclassmen, you served us this same tea, saying it was the most popular brand in the capital. You said it was so popular that we couldn’t get any here in the countryside.”

“Ah, I’m surprised you remember that. It must have been more than a year ago.” The old man said, astonished.

“Yes. Were you telling the truth then?”

“I’m sorry to say that I wasn’t.”

Allison burst into laughter at the old man’s sincerity.

“Are you a student at the secondary school too, young lady?”

“No. I’m not that smart, so I went straight into the workforce. I’m just visiting Wil because I’m on vacation.”

The old man nodded.

"Oh, but Wil's a student. He's really smart, and he even placed sixth in the Kaashi Shooting Competition." Allison said, lightly slapping Wil on the back.

"That's impressive. It's certainly worth bragging about." The old man said, his eyes widening.

"Right?"

"But I'm afraid I'll do you one better. When I was young, I *won* the competition four times, and placed second twice. Why, I swept the awards so often that, after a while, they told me to stop entering!"

"That's amazing. Wil, I think he beat you, even if he's lying." Allison said, pointing at Wil.

"I guess I'll just have to practice more." Wil said with a wry grin. Allison and the old man laughed.

"You're a funny young lady. I'd never be bored if all the students were more like you. More tea?"

"Yes, please."

The old man poured Allison another cup of tea and offered some to Wil as well. But Wil declined, showing his still-unfinished tea and saying he wasn't very good with hot food and drinks.

"By the way, you two. Let me tell you one more story, to pass the time. Now, I haven't told this one to very many people. What would you think of it, I wonder? Actually, the truth is…"

The old man paused dramatically, before continuing.

"…I know where you can find an amazing treasure."

"A treasure?" Allison repeated, and turned to Wil. Wil shrugged, sipping his tea with an uncomfortable look.

"Yes. A treasure. Are you curious now?" The old man asked, leaning closer.

"Is this true?" Allison asked.

"Of course. I've been telling you all kinds of lies until now, but this story alone is completely true." The old man replied. He didn't sound any more trustworthy than he did before. "And if you find out that I'm lying, you can take my life. Not that there's much left of it now."

Allison stared at the man for several seconds. Then,

"I see. I'm interested. What kind of treasure is it?"

"Something amazing."

"How much is it worth?"

"It's not something you can put a price on. It's just too valuable. But…"

"But?"

Wil watched the conversation as he lazily sipped his tea.

"This really is delicious." He mumbled to himself.

"But…" The old man continued, with a sharp look at Allison. She returned the stare.

"This treasure I'm telling you about is something that can end the war between Roxche and Sou Be-Il. That's how valuable it is." The old man said. Wil looked up at him.

"Isn't it the most unbelievable story?" The old man said proudly.

"It's really amazing, if you're telling the truth. But how did you find that treasure?" Allison asked. Wil put down his cup and began to listen in earnest.

"By pure chance. Do you know about the poison gas attack on Sou Be-Il forces that took place during the war in this area?"

Allison nodded.

"Something about a lieutenant colonel and his special unit. Dad told me about it a long time ago."

"Ah. You see, I was a member of that very unit. We stumbled upon this treasure on our way back from the mission. We were all shocked. But it was impossible for us to just bring that treasure back. So we vowed to keep its existence a secret and left it where it was."

"But they told us in history class that Lieutenant Colonel McMillan was the only survivor from that unit." Wil pointed out.

"That was a lie spread by the army to protect the members of the unit from retaliation by enemy spies. And to add to that, there was never anyone called Lieutenant Colonel McMillan. He's a fictional character who was made to avert responsibility for the poison gas attack from the people involved. Surprised?"

"If you're right, then we've been learning lies from the teachers all this time." Wil replied. The old man laughed.

"That's what history is. The most important thing isn't 'how to convey the truth', but 'how we convey only certain facts for the most advantageous conclusion'."

"…"

"Why didn't you announce that you found the treasure?" Allison asked.

"Hm… The treasure was so stunning that everyone must be too scared to say. And no one would have believed us if all we did was announce the discovery. Not without proof, anyway."

The old man's words began to grow vague.

"Then why didn't you go back for it?"

“Well… There was so much happening during the war and right afterwards. And the treasure was in Sou Be-Il territory.”

“What about now?”

“Inside the buffer zone, where no one lives. I’m quite relieved. After all, no one is going to stumble on it now. Of course, I wouldn’t particularly mind if someone did find it. It doesn’t matter now. There’s nothing I want anymore. What would I do with a fortune at my age? Just knowing where I can find that treasure is enough for me. I’m just waiting for the day that someone discovers it. What do you think? Wasn’t that an interesting story?”

“It was! But is it really there? If I go there, will I really find this amazing treasure?”

“Of course.” The old man nodded.

“And will whoever finds it become a hero?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Hm…” Allison muttered, falling into thought.

“Do you believe me?” The old man asked. Wil said nothing, only looking at Allison.

“I do.”

“Ah, I’m happy to hear that. More tea?” The old man asked, holding up the teapot. Allison waved her left hand.

“No thank you. Now, about that treasure…”

“Hm?”

“I’ll believe you, so please tell me where it is. I’ll take you there, sir. And I’ll make the announcement under my name and Wil’s.”

The old man froze.

“…Y, you can’t get there on a motorcycle…”

“That’s not a problem.” Allison replied, taking out her jacket from her bag. “Look at this.”

She spread out the jacket and held it up to the old man. On the collar was her badge of rank, identifying her as a staff sergeant. Emblazoned over the right and left breasts were the name and emblem of the Roxchean Air Force. On the left shoulder was the Spear of Seron.

The old man’s wrinkled eyes turned to dinner plates.

“Unbelievable… So you’re a soldier, young lady?”

“I’m from the air force, to be exact. My unit transports aeroplanes from place to place. If we ever have to fly in the area, I’ll sneak you and Wil along and take you to the treasure.”

“Allison… Is that even allowed?” Wil asked. Allison shot him a look.

“No.”

“No…?”

“I’d definitely get jail time, no two ways about it. But if we manage to find something that valuable, they’ll let me off easy, and things will turn out for the better. What do you think, sir?” Allison asked, turning to the old man. He was still looking at her jacket.

“Incredible… to think that there were soldiers like you, young lady… Times truly have changed. May I touch this jacket?”

The old man reached for the jacket. Allison handed it to him. The man looked at the Spear of Seron emblazoned on the shoulder, and placed a hand on the collar, where the badge of rank was.

“‘Ah, the bird that knows not its parent soars without limit’.” He mumbled to himself, stroking the badge with his fingers.

“So, what do you say?” Allison asked, leaning forward.

The old man returned her jacket and nodded slightly.

“You really are a curious pair. It might be interesting to tell you more.”

He cleared his throat.

Chapter 2: Kidnapping, Arson, and Theft

"Now… where to begin… Hm?"

Just as the old man began to speak, they heard the sound of a vehicle coming to a stop in front of the house. Then, they heard a car door opening and closing.

The old man stopped and looked at the door. There was a knock.

"What is it? The door is open."

"Please excuse me." Said a suit-clad man in his thirties as he entered the house.

"…!"

The man froze for a moment at the sight of Allison and Wil staring at him. Then, he cleared his throat and politely addressed the old man.

"Pardon the intrusion, but are you the owner of this house?"

The old man nodded.

"I'm from the tax office. I'm here to discuss something about your property tax…. And who would these two be? Your family?" The man asked, gesturing at Allison and Wil with an open palm.

"No, they are my guests. Don't be alarmed, now."

"I see. I was told that you lived alone." The man said with a nod. Wil paled slightly. The man's eyes grew ever-so-slightly sharper. "I'm terribly sorry about this, sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to accompany me to the office. There's some technical details I can't get into here…"

"Wait! We haven't finished talking yet." Allison butted in. The man's expression hardened.

"But…"

"Do I have to go today? What if I say no?" The old man asked.

"I was told to bring you to the office by today. I've even got the proper documentation, if you'd like to see." The man shook his head reluctantly and reached into his jacket. The old man sighed, his shoulders dropping.

"All right, I understand. I'll go with you. I suppose you can hear my complaints at the office."

"Thank you for your cooperation." The man said. The old man stood up, and the suit-clad man put a hand on his back.

"I'm very sorry I have to cut things off here, young man. Young lady. I'll have to tell you the story some other time. Stay awhile and relax. You don't need to lock the door; there's nothing to steal here, anyway." The old man said, looking a little sour. He began heading for the door.

“W, wait…”

Allison tried to stop them, but the old man and the suit-clad man walked away. They stepped outside.

Allison followed them out. Wil also stood from his seat and joined her. There was a black car parked outside the house. It was the latest model with white lace curtains draped over the windows of the back seat.

The old man sat down in the back, as the suit-clad man instructed. At that moment, the old man looked at Allison and Wil and waved at them with a smile.

“If you’ll excuse us.” The suit-clad man said, taking the passenger seat. The driver started the car. It departed along the left side of the narrow road. Then, it veered heavily to the right and disappeared.

“Who was that guy? I don’t care if he’s some official from the tax office. That was just plain rude.” Allison spat angrily. The car was now a tiny speck in the distance, occasionally dipping in and out of sight each time it hit a bend in the road.

Allison looked up at the sky to estimate the time based on the position of the sun. She glanced at her wristwatch for confirmation. Afternoon was already half over.

“Let’s lock the door and go back, Wil.” She said, prepared to leave, but the gravity in Wil’s expression stopped her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something’s strange.” Wil said, eyes on Allison.

“What is?”

“If that man really was from the local tax office, why was he so surprised to see us? Why did he ask if we were the old man’s family?”

“What do you mean?”

Will pointed at the school motorcycle parked next to them.

“Anyone from Neit would have known from the motorcycle that someone from our school was in here with-”

Before Wil could even finish, determination rose to Allison’s face.

She rushed into the house and came back outside, pulling on her jacket and carrying two bags and Wil’s jacket. She tossed Wil the latter, threw the bags into the sidecar, and produced a pair of goggles from her own pocket.

“Allison?”

As Wil came up to her in confusion, Allison climbed onto the motorcycle and cried,

"Key!"

The motorcycle was racing down the road.

Driving the vehicle was Allison, wearing her jacket, aviator hat, and goggles. And sitting in the sidecar was Wil, hanging onto the handle for dear life.

Through the roar of the engine, the whooshing of the wind, and the bumping of the motorcycle, Wil shouted loudly,

"Allison! What good is chasing them going to do?"

"I'm going to talk to them!"

"…And then what?"

"And… and… I'm just going to get their story! From that official guy! I'm going to ask for ID, too!"

Wil was about to say something, when Allison sped up even more. The shaking intensified.

"Slow down, Allison!" Wil cried without thinking, holding tightly onto the handle. Allison complied.

"Thanks." Wil said, relieved. At that moment,

"There!" Allison yelled.

Wil asked where 'there' was. Allison pointed at some point ahead of them, to the left. But no matter how much Wil squinted, he could not see them.

Allison slowed down and swerved left onto an even narrower path. She sped up again. Wil could finally see a little speck driving in the distance. It was the same car from before.

"I wonder where they're going."

"Definitely not Makkaniu. That's the opposite direction. That way… there shouldn't be anything but farmland."

"That's even more suspicious." Allison said excitedly.

By the time the motorcycle caught up with the car, the car began to slow.

About ten meters behind the car, Allison sounded the klaxon several times. The car slowed down even more, but it continued to cruise, not stopping.

"What's he up to? I'm going to overtake him and *make* him stop." Allison declared angrily.

"You can't. The road's too narrow." Wil pointed out. The road was about the width of a car and a half. The shoulder led down a slope to an unused patch of farmland about a meter below.

"…Urgh."

Allison angrily sounded the klaxon once more, but the car continued cruising at minimum speed, as though taunting her.

“I’ll chase you down as far as this fuel tank takes us!”

“Don’t be so ra-”

The moment Wil spoke, the car suddenly veered into the middle of the road. Up ahead was a narrow bridge.

Allison continued to sound the klaxon, following the car into the middle of the road.

“Huh?”

Wil noticed something sticking out of the rear window on the right side of the car. It was a person’s hand. It was gripping something black, small, and thin.

The round cylinder of the object was pointed in their direction.

“…! Allison! They’ve got a gun!” Wil cried, getting to his feet in the sidecar and pulling Allison over to him by the jacket.

“Whoa!”

Allison moved across into the sidecar, taken by surprise. The motorcycle without a driver began to tilt off-balance. Wil tightly held Allison and leapt onto the shoulder.

They tumbled down the hill through overgrown weeds. The blue of the sky and the green of the earth spun in their vision in turn.

The riderless motorcycle continued, leaning away from the sidecar, before the sidecar hit the railings of the bridge. The motorcycle spun from the impact, flipping over halfway and landing on its side, scattering Allison and Wil’s belongings everywhere.

The hand disappeared back into the car. The car sped off.

Allison was lying on the boundary between the shoulder and the farmland. Grass covered her goggles, filling her vision with green.

She tried moving her arms and legs. Everything seemed to be working, and she didn’t feel any pain.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, she realized that there was something on top of her. Her jacket had come undone, and there was something pressing down on her chest.

Allison slowly brushed away the grass.

“Wil…?”

Her vision was clear again. Allison raised her head and looked over her body.

"…"

With a disappointed look, she pushed away her bag from atop her chest.

"Wil?"

Allison leapt to her feet and called for Wil. She looked around. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Wil!"

"Over here… I'm over here, Allison…"

She could hear Wil's feeble voice. Allison walked over in his direction. He was in the creek, sitting in the water as though he had landed that way. His lower body was soaked.

"Are you all right, Wil? You're not hurt, are you?"

Wil looked up.

"I hit my leg on something, but I think I'm fine. What about you, Allison?"

"I'm all right. Thanks for asking."

"That's a relief. Did you see the gun they were aiming from the car?"

Allison shook her head.

"I see…"

"Here."

Allison held out her hand. Wil took it and rose to his feet, dripping wet. He sat on the bank of the creek.

"What about the car?" He asked.

Allison leapt onto the shoulder and looked into the distance. The car was long gone.

"Damn it!" She swore.

* * *

The student dormitories of Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School were a distinctive structure in Makkaniu.

On the edge of the village of narrow roads and wooden buildings was a long, large, three-story building made of reinforced concrete, something straight out of the streets of the capital. Four such buildings were clustered together in two lines. In the middle of the structures was a large cafeteria, the dormitory office, and lodgings for visitors.

During the school year, over a thousand students lived in these dorms; it was constantly lively and brimming over with energy. But now that the break had started, only one of the buildings was in use.

It was evening. Wil's room was dark. Only dim light filtered in through the glass pane on his door.

Wil had moved to this room from another building for the break. This room in particular was technically a double, so it was rather large. There were two desks, chairs, and closets. Inside one of the closets was Wil's leather suitcase. It was a large traveling case, where Wil usually put most of his belongings.

In a corner of the room was a hot-water pipe used for heating (which was not currently in use), which ran along the wall. There were two beds. One was bare of its mattress, its pipe structure and springs exposed to the air. On the other bed lay Wil, dressed in his pajamas.

But Wil was not asleep.

"…"

In the dark, he lay with his eyes open, deep in thought.

It was afternoon, jus after they had lost the car.

Wil borrowed a towel Allison had on hand to dry off, and wrung out his clothes.

The motorcycle's handle was slightly bent, and the sidecar was dented. But it still worked without issue.

They headed for the village with Allison driving, and made straight for the police station. Of course, the station was a single humble building, and there were only three police officers in the village (barring unusual circumstances). One was currently on vacation, and another was on patrol at the time. The middle-aged officer who greeted Allison and Wil was initially shocked by their claim of an old man being kidnapped by a fake official. Allison explained the situation, leaving out the part about the treasure.

But the officer seemed to have decided that this kidnapping plot with the fake official and the gun wasn't very credible. His reacted with disinterest.

"That was no help at all!" Allison complained as she returned to Wil, who was waiting outside because he was still wet. In the end, the officer had asked Allison for her name and the address of her lodgings for the night. He was laid-back to the end, telling Allison that he'd call the tax office and speak to the old man's housekeeper tomorrow.

Allison and Wil returned to the old man's house and left a note for the housekeeper. They didn't know what to tell her, so they wrote, 'he left somewhere with someone from the tax office'.

It was already well past sundown and dinnertime (which doubled as a curfew) when they finally made it back to the dorms. Wil's clothes were completely dry.

The infamously strict dormitory matron scolded Wil, demanding to know why he had broken both the curfew and the motorcycle. Because Wil could not tell her the truth, he claimed that he was late because he had ended up going too far, and that the sidecar was dented because he swerved to avoid an animal that had leapt into the road. The matron expressed her disappointment in him. And for the first time in his student life, Wil was forced to write an apologetic essay reflecting on his actions.

Allison confidently strode up to the visitors' lodgings and rented a cheap room as a guest. And as for dinner, they had to make do with bread with jam and milk in the only lit corner of the cafeteria.

"This isn't too bad."

Wil reluctantly bit down on his food, while Allison commented that she had eaten worse during training.

In the dorms, it was not permitted for boys and girls to meet past dinnertime. Allison and Wil said goodnight at the cafeteria and returned to their own rooms.

"There you are Wil you're finally back seriously who was that girl—I mean, pilot—and what kind of relationship do you two have and what were you doing all this time you're going to tell me because we're buddies right?"

Wil shook off his friend, claiming he had to work on the essay he was assigned, and returned to his room. And he really began to write his essay.

It was nearly midnight when, with lingering guilt, he finished organizing these unfamiliar sentences conveying made-up excuses.

"…"

Wil looked up at the ceiling.

"A treasure, huh."

The moment he mumbled to himself, there was a gust of wind. His window rattled in its frame. And again. And again.

"…Huh…?"

When the window rattled for the sixth time, Wil finally got off his bed and turned on a small lamp. He went up to see if the window was slightly ajar, and found his jaw dropping.

"!"

Overlapping with his reflection in the window was Allison's smile.

She gestured at him to unlock the window. The moment Wil pushed up the pane, she poked inside and slid into his room without a sound. Just like that afternoon, she was wearing her jacket. Around her waist was a belt made with a small canvas bag sewn into the back.

"A, Allison?"

"Hey, Wil. Were you awake? I needed to talk to you about something." Allison said, putting her index finger to her lips.

"Allison, this is the third floor."

"As if a pilot'd be scared of heights."

"That's not an answer…"

"I used the rain gutters. They drive rain gutters into reinforced concrete buildings to strengthen them, you know."

"…"

"Are we okay to talk here?"

"Hm… We *won't* be okay if someone hears your voice from the halls."

"Right. Can we go to the rooftop, then? Let's go someplace higher up."

Wil nodded slightly, before remembering something.

"I'm not using the rain gutters."

"Then take the stairs. Make sure no one sees you. And get changed before you come."

On the flat roof of the dormitory building stood laundry hangers used for large quantities of bedsheets.

Allison and Wil were standing by the railings, which were about as tall as they were. Wil was dressed in long pants and a button-up shirt, and he was carrying a light jacket.

Ahead of them was an empty building—a black mass over the dormitory office and the visitors' lodgings.

"That's me." Allison said, pointing at one of the rooms. The curtains were open, and the desk lamp was turned on. There was something in the bed, under the blankets, as though someone was lying there.

"…Is that a rolled-up blanket?"

"Yeah. The trick is to shape the legs and waist to make them look thinner instead of just rolling up the blanket into a cylinder. And also to half-cover the pillow with cloth the same color as my hair. It looks just like a person in the dark."

"Where'd you learn how to do this stuff…?"

"The Air Force Academy. For training after lights-out… But most people use this trick to sneak out for some fun. You can't graduate until you master it."

"…"

"Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?"

Allison pulled out a flat cylindrical tin from her bag.

"Here."

She opened the tin, took out a blackish chunk of food, and held it in front of Wil's mouth. It was too dark to make out what it was.

"What is this?"

"You'll know once you try. Try it. It's not spicy or anything."

Wil, who disliked spicy food, put the chunk into his mouth. He grimaced.

"Urgh… What is this? It's really sweet…"

"Dry chocolate. I bet you've never tried it."

"So this is chocolate? I've heard about it before, but I didn't think it'd be *this* sweet. The inside of my mouth feels all sticky…"

Allison watched Wil's reaction with amusement. She also helped herself to some chocolate and licked her fingers.

She then held out a small water bottle to Wil.

"Thanks." Wil said, after taking two gulps.

"You're welcome." Allison also drank some.

"Isn't this expensive?"

"Who knows? They give this stuff to pilots. In case we get tired or we have to make an emergency landing."

"I guess it's really nutritious."

"That's what they say. Anyway, we can save the chocolate discussion for later. I want to talk about the treasure."

"The treasure?"

Allison nodded.

"If some mysterious armed group is involved, that story *has* to be real."

"You mean you really believe the old man?"

"Yeah, but not until he was kidnapped. And then that guy tried to shoot us when we followed the car. I mean, until then, I just *wished* it was a real story."

"Right. But…"

"But?"

"It's a bit weird to say this, since I was the one who pulled you off the motorcycle, but I can't say for sure if that was a real gun or not. Maybe I just saw it wrong. Maybe I just made a bad guy of someone who has nothing to do with any conspiracy." Wil said, cradling his head in his hands. Allison gently put a hand on his back.

"It's all right. I trust you."

"Allison…"

"So I know that treasure's *got* to exist."

"…"

"Let's find that old man and ask him where the treasure is. And we'll discover it before anyone else does. You and me."

"…A treasure that can end the conflict, huh." Wil mumbled, and looked into Allison's indistinct face.

Allison, meanwhile, could clearly see Wil's grave expression.

"What do you say?"

A moment later, Wil shook his head.

"I'm really sorry, but there's a few reasons I can't go along with your idea."

"Tell me."

"The first reason is that old man. He might have been lying to us like the usually does, or maybe he's gone so senile he can't tell if he's telling the truth or not. Another reason is that the treasure he's talking about is too incredible. Something that can help Roxche and Sou Be-Il get along? Do you really believe something like that could exist?"

"No way." Allison said, shaking her head. Then she added, "Maybe he was just using a metaphor?"

"Maybe. But… my last reason is that I can't believe someone would really believe his stories and go so far as to kidnap him under a disguise."

"But that man *was* really suspicious, weren't they?"

"Yeah, but…"

"Then it's decided. We have to at least follow them."

"…All right. But what are we supposed to do? We can't go after them if we don't know who they were or where they went. And we can't even ask-"

Allison held up a finger.

"Exactly, Wil. I had an idea."

"Sounds great, but-"

Wil was cut off by an ear-splitting alarm. The sound grew louder and louder, as though it was traveling from the ground floor up. Allison turned to Wil.

“What’s going on?”

“The fire alarm.”

“A fire? Today’s just full of excitement, huh? …Hm? Wil, look over there.”

Allison was pointing at her room. Someone was inside.

“Who’s that?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Are they…”

‘Are they there to evacuate her’, Wil was about to say, when the figure tossed something onto Allison’s bed. The bed burst into flames.

“!”

“What?!”

The flames lit up the entire room, and the figure. It was a man, who was dressed in a black coat despite the fact that it was summer. The man turned away and left the room.

“What…? That’s arson.” Wil said blankly.

“Wil!” Allison cried, “it’s him! That useless officer I met this afternoon!”

Wil turned in shock. Allison’s face was clearly visible now, lit up by the flames.

“He must be trying to kill me because I witnessed the kidnapping. Erasing the evidence. Now I’m even more sure about this. Perfect. We’ll go ask that man.”

“Allison… If you want to smile or get angry, please don’t do both at the same time. You’ll scare people.”

There was a parking lot next to the dormitories, used by guests and people dropping off luggage. Because the building right next to it was currently not being used, there were no lights around and no streetlamps were turned on. Only the faint sound of the fire alarm rang in the darkness.

There was a car parked in the lot.

Soon, a man appeared, accompanied by the sound of rushed footsteps. He stopped beside the car, out of breath.

The moment he placed a hand on the door of the car, a beam of light illuminated him. The man was middle-aged, wearing a police uniform, and holding a rolled-up black coat under his arm. The car in front of him was the village police cruiser.

“Wh, wh?! Wh, who are you?!” He cried in a panic. Wil, holding a flashlight, answered him.

“Sorry if I scared you, officer. I’m a student at this school.” He said, turning the flashlight to illuminate himself.

“O, oh. I see. Young man, the fire alarm’s gone off. Y, you have to evacuate. I’ll go contact the fire-”

“I’m sure you already know that arson is a felony.”

“What?”

“Why would you do something like this?” Wil asked calmly.

Next to the car, Allison quietly snuck up to the officer from behind.

“I, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

She pulled down the officer by his legs and kneed his back as he lay face-down in the gravel.

“Urgh!”

As the officer writhed in pain, Allison grabbed his arms and took his handcuffs from his belt. She bent back his arms, put the handcuffs on his wrists, and sat him up.

“Hello there. I’d like to ask you a few things.” She said. The officer’s eyes turned to dinner plates at the sight of his victim talking to him.

“Wh, wha…”

“Who was the one who kidnapped the old man? Considering the scale of this cover-up, I’d guess it was some very powerful-”

“I, I, I don’t know!”

“Really?”

Allison reached for the bag behind her back and drew something.

“Light, please.”

Wil did as he was asked. In Allison’s hand was a small handgun. It was a 6-shot automatic pistol, issued to pilots and officers in the Roxchean Air Force.

“Eyaaargh!”

“Wait!”

The officer and Wil cried at once.

Allison showed to Wil, but not the officer, the base of the black gun.

"…"

There was no magazine. Wil sighed uncomfortably.

Allison deliberately lowered her voice and threatened the officer.

"I didn't tell you this earlier, but I'm actually a soldier. And like my friend just told you, arson happens to be a felony. I'm sure they'll give me a medal for catching a-"

"W, wait! Wait, please! Ouch…!"

The moment the man tried to stand, Allison went around his back and stomped down on his handcuffs.

"But even though I've found the culprit behind this awful crime, there's just no way to prevent him from escaping…" Allison whispered coldly into his ear, "so it looks like the reason behind this police officer setting fire only to a single bed is going to be lost forever-"

"I, I, I'll talk! I'll talk! So please, don't shoot me! I'm begging you, please!"

"Really? Tell me, then. You weren't trying to do something bad, were you? Who told you to do this?" Allison asked, quickly switching to a gentler voice. The officer nodded to her over and over again.

"Y, yes. That man told me he had something to talk about with the old man. Th, that he'd take him away in secret, so I shouldn't investigate. I, I didn't do anything wrong…"

"Why did he take the old man? Who was he?"

"I, I don't know…"

"How did he know about the old man?"

"P, probably… probably at the village gathering two months ago… All kinds of people were there from all kinds of places. One of the other officers was telling everyone about the headache of an old man we had here."

"What did he say?"

"Everything the old man always said. About how he used to be part of some royal family, how he's actually an author, how he became rich overnight through a mining business, how there's an incredible treasure hidden at the border-"

Allison and Wil exchanged glances. The officer went on to list more of the old man's lies, but neither Allison nor Wil were listening. Allison only mumbled, "I knew it," to herself.

"About ten days ago, someone I don't know contacted me. Said he wanted to look into something, and that he needed to take the old man along."

"And they told you to ignore anyone who came to you about a kidnapping? And they paid you in exchange?" Wil asked. The officer was silent.

"That's the most logical answer. You were so shocked because I happened to see it. Did you contact that man this evening? They must have told you to cover up what happened, or risk

having your dirty secret exposed. So you committed arson and made it look like an accident. Am I wrong?”

“…”

“You must have been in a very tight spot. So where did those kidnappers take the old man? The next village?”

“I don’t know…”

“You might want to start knowing.” Allison said, poking the man in the head with the barrel of her gun. Each time metal met his skin, the officer shook.

Wil, cringing at Allison’s actions, suddenly remembered something.

“Officer, is there something northwest of the village?”

“What? Th, there’s nothing-”

The moment Wil heard the officer’s answer, he opened the door of the police cruiser and went inside. He pulled out several maps lying next to the driver’s seat, and scanned for a map of the vicinity of the village.

“There,” he said, unfolding one of the maps next to the car.

With their eyes, they followed the road heading northwest. There were several small lakes, and farmland labeled with the names of their owners. Eventually, the road hit a vast tract of land filled in one solid color. Written in large letters over it were the words ‘Private Property’.

“I get it.” Allison declared. “They didn’t take him to the next village; they went to this piece of land here.”

“N, n, n, n, no! Th, th, they didn’t!”

At the officer’s panicked reaction, Allison said triumphantly,

“Apparently they did.”

Bright headlights and wailing sirens approached the dormitory parking lot. They were the village fire trucks, painted red and carrying tanks of water.

One of the four trucks came to a stop in front of the police cruiser. The two firefighters hanging from beside the driver’s seat leapt onto the ground and approached the police car. They were shocked to find a man handcuffed and bound to the car door. They were floored when they realized that the man was a police officer.

The firefighters approached the police officer, who stood hanging his head. Next to his head —on the doorframe—was posted a note.

[I set fire to an empty room and decided to arrest myself. I’m sorry for all the trouble. I must have gone crazy for a moment. I’m very very very very very very sorry.]

The firefighters silently exchanged glances.

Opposite the parking lot.

The students were lined up at the main gates to the dormitory, having been loudly woken by the matron and the dormitory manager. The students chattered excitedly at their midnight evacuation and the rare sight of the fire trucks.

The flames in the visitors' lodgings were extinguished by the firefighters who first arrived on the scene. They already confirmed that there was no one inside the burning room, and now the matron and the dormitory manager were counting all the students.

Soon, they realized that fifth-year student Wilhelm Schultz and his friend were gone. A small commotion broke out.

As everyone raised their voices, Wil's friend mumbled to himself,

"You've gone and done it now, Wil. Or are you just getting started?"

There was a lone headlight illuminating the darkness.

The motorcycle was moving along the road headed northwest. Allison was driving; Wil was clinging to the sidecar.

Allison had abandoned the officer and headed for the motorcycle parking lot. When Wil asked her what she was planning to do, she replied that she would borrow a motorcycle for a while. That she would take it to the private property to rescue the old man.

Wil pointed out that they didn't have a key. Allison replied,

"That's not a problem."

The moment she stepped into the deserted lot, she began tapping on fuel tanks. She picked out the one that made the dullest sound—in other words, the one with the most fuel. She checked the two wires sticking out of the keyhole, and cut them with a small knife. She then stepped down on the kick start lever and started the ignition at once.

Wil asked her if this was another trick from the Air Force Academy.

"No, I learned this from a sergeant in my unit who knows a lot about stealing cars. It's a technique for stealing vehicles in case we have to make an emergency landing. I learned a lot of other things from my unit, too." Allison said matter-of-factly.

"All right. Let's go!"

Allison slowed down the motorcycle.

"Okay, that's five kilometers. Which way now?"

"There should be a bridge ahead. If you turn right, we'll hit a narrow road. It's almost parallel to the river." Wil instructed, looking at the map with a flashlight. Allison spotted the road he was talking about and made a turn.

The motorcycle drove along a narrow gravel path. Allison had to drive carefully at minimum speed.

“Allison.” Wil said.

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t they teach you that you should never aim a gun at someone? Even if it’s not loaded?”

“No,” Allison answered, looking ahead. “Maybe that’s how they taught you, but when I was learning to use a gun, they said I shouldn’t hesitate to shoot if it meant protecting myself or my comrades.”

“…To protect someone, huh.” Wil said, falling into thought. The sound of the engine and the crunching of gravel echoed in the darkness.

“I wonder which one is the right answer, Allison.” Wil said.

“What do you think, Wil?” Allison asked.

“I… don’t know.” Wil replied. Allison chuckled.

“Me neither.”

“Keep going down this road. About ten more kilometers.”

“Okay.”

The moon came up.

The eastern sky began to glow a faint white. The half-moon peeked above the horizon and silently rose higher and higher into the air.

The moon was this planet’s only satellite, making a full orbit around the planet once every eight days. It was quite close to the planet, and its surface was white in color. It reflected a great deal of the sun’s rays. When the moon was full, it became so bright that it was possible to do farm work in the middle of the night. In the past, people did, in facts, do farm work at night as a career. And on snow-covered landscapes, a night under the full moon was little different from daytime. One could supposedly even read books in such conditions.

At the moment, the moon was only half-full. But it was large enough that a person had to raise a fist to just cover it. The moon rose higher, illuminating the world in pale light.

“Perfect.”

Allison turned off the headlight. The white gravel path was clear under the natural light.

Soon, they spotted a coniferous forest ahead. Because everything around it was a flat plain, the dark woods looked rather like an island floating in the sea.

There was a wooden gate in front of the forest. On either side, metal fences stretched along the edge of the property.

"'Property of Mr. Terreur. No unauthorized entry'." Allison said, reading off the sign posted on the gate. "Who's Mr. Terreur?" She wondered.

"He must be the owner of that steel company. He's really rich—I heard he's got a bunch of vacation homes in Raputoa."

"Oh, that evil greedy rich guy. He really made a killing thanks to the war, right?"

"Allison. Do you ever *not* call a rich person evil and greedy?"

"What, am I wrong?"

"…Anyway, what should we do?"

"I don't know…"

Allison froze. She held up a finger in front of Wil's mouth. Wil realized what she was trying to say. They could hear the faint roar of an engine in the distance.

It grew louder. The sound was coming from the woods.

"Is that a car?" Wil whispered. Allison shook her head.

With her hands cupped around her ears, Allison focused on the sound. It was moving through the forest. And then it rose.

She looked up at the sky. A grey mass was lit by the moon. An aeroplane.

It was an amphibious plane with a short, streamlined fuselage designed for water landings and a set of landing gear jutting underneath. It had one main wing, atop which were two engines.

The aeroplane flew off with the moon at its back. The roar of the engines grew fainter, until they passed out of hearing altogether.

"I knew it…" Allison muttered.

"You knew it?" Wil repeated, shocked.

"This area is completely undeveloped, so I was pretty sure they came by aeroplane. And if this is private property, the Confederation Aeronautics Board won't care that they made themselves a personal airstrip. It's perfect for moving around in secret."

"You're right. That didn't even occur to me." Wil said, impressed.

"They must have waited for the moon before they took off. I'm sure they took the old man on that aeroplane."

"What should we do?" Wil asked. Allison held up her fist before her mouth and thought for ten seconds. Then, she looked up.

“Let’s head for their airstrip.”

“But this is private property.” Wil said.

“This is an emergency.” Allison replied immediately.

Allison and Wil jumped over the fence and stepped into the property. They walked at a hurried pace along the edge of the road so that they could dive straight into the woods if they saw someone coming.

They followed the winding road. Once they had turned two or three bends, they emerged into an open space. It was a long, flat piece of land, cut clear of trees and flattened carefully. It was an airstrip built in secret.

“This is really well made. You wouldn’t even know this was an airstrip unless you flew right overhead.” Allison said, honestly impressed. “And there’s electricity running, too.”

She pointed at a small hut in the distance. Next to the hut was a large building that looked like a warehouse with closed shutters and a tin roof. The structures were diagonally across from Allison and Wil, with the airstrip between them. They could see light faintly seeping from the hut.

“Let’s check it out.”

“Someone might be inside.”

“So we’ll sneak over.”

They rushed across the airstrip and slowly approached the hut. Parked beside it was a car. It was the same one that had taken the old man away earlier that day.

Allison threw a small rock. It hit the car with a small noise, but no one stepped outside. They could not see anyone around, either.

“Stay here.”

Before Wil could even respond, Allison ran over to the hut and slowly raised her head, peeking in through the window. She then gestured Wil over.

Wil hesitated for a moment, before following her to the hut.

“It’s all right.”

He peeked into the window, just as Allison instructed. Hanging from the ceiling was a bare lightbulb with a lonely shade over it. The hut was furnished with a bed and other pieces of necessary furniture, and set up in the middle was a table and some chairs. There was a middle-aged man in work wear sleeping there with his face on the table.

Wil ducked down again.

“He must be working here.” Allison said.

“Why’s he sleeping? The plane just took off a few minutes ago…” Wil wondered. Allison agreed enthusiastically.

“Good question. Something’s off here. Let’s wake up that man and get some answers.”

“H, how?”

“I have an idea.”

Allison took off her jacket, rolled it up, and handed it to Wil.

She then walked around the hut to the entrance, and opened the door without a moment’s hesitation. Wil followed her, confused.

“Hey! You!” Allison said loudly to the man.

“Uh…” The man moaned, and fell back asleep.

“Wake up!” Allison cried, hitting the man in the back over and over again. The table shook so much that some tea left over in a mug on the table spilled slightly.

“Ahh… Sorry, Mom…”

The man finally raised his head. Allison shook him even more violently. His eyes opened slightly. With fatigue still clear in his expression, he looked at Allison and Wil.

“Wh, who’re you…?”

“That’s *my* line. What are you doing here? This is Uncle Terreur’s property!” Allison said confidently. Wil froze for a moment, but the man quickly replied in a panicked voice,

“Wh, what? I, uh… Mr. Terreur put me in charge of managing this place. Um…”

“All right.”

Wil breathed a sigh of relief.

“But why were you asleep on the job? I wonder what Uncle would say if I told him about what I saw just now.”

“P, please, Miss! Wait! Please hear me out.” The man said anxiously, looking up at Allison. He shook his head a few times to clear his mind of sleep.

“Fine. Tell me.”

“I, I… I’m a mechanic. I mainly do car maintenance. Three days ago, I was ordered to bring a car here and remain on standby. I was sure Mr. Terreur would come by aeroplane soon. But no matter how long I waited, he never came. And that’s when a police officer from the village came up… And…”

Allison exchanged glances with Wil at the mention of the word ‘police’.

“…And?”

“Well, you see… That officer said that he was finally off patrol duty, and… He just kept offering, and it was the middle of the night… So…”

“…So?”

The man shrank.

“…So I drank.”

“You did *what*?! On the job?!” Allison cried indignantly. The man clasped his hands in desperation.

“Please, Miss… I’m terribly sorry. Please… Don’t tell Mr. Terreur. I… I can’t lose my job now…”

“…Fine. We didn’t tell Uncle we were coming to visit, anyway. We’ll call this a mutual secret. We never came to this place. Okay?”

“Yes! Of course! I… I got some tea from that officer so I’d sober up, but I suddenly felt drowsy, and…”

Allison’s eyes fell on the cup on the table.

“I understand. So you ended up sleeping all day. Without keeping an eye on Uncle’s property.”

“I’m so sorry, Miss! But I still don’t understand why I became so sleepy all of a sudden…”

The man yawned loudly. He coughed.

“So we have no idea if someone’s trespassed or not. You should have been more careful.”

“I’m terribly sorry… Oh! I, is the aeroplane safe? Is it still there?!”

The man paled instantly. Allison smiled so no one would see.

“What aeroplane?”

“There’s a Hewels Model ‘84 in the hangar next door, ready to take off. If someone’s stolen it, I wouldn’t be able to face Mr. Terreur…”

“I see… That’s unfortunate. It looks like someone’s already taken it. We just checked outside; the door was open and there wasn’t anything in the hangar.”

Wil looked taken aback.

“No…” The man cradled his head in his hands.

“I suppose I don’t have any choice. It wasn’t *completely* your fault. I’ll talk to Uncle and see what I can do.” Allison said gently.

“Th, thank you, Miss! W, we have to call Mr. Terreur right away! We have to tell him what happened!”

“But first, here. You’ll feel better after a sip.” Allison said, holding out a cup to the man as he got out of his seat. The man drained it without a moment’s hesitation.

“You have to settle down. It’s not good for you if you get to your feet too suddenly. Close your eyes.”

“R, right… Oh… I’m feeling… drowsy again…”

Once more the man flopped over the table and fell asleep.

“Good night.”

Allison brought a blanket from the bed and covered the man.

“Perfect!”

“…”

Wil watched silently as Allison celebrated with fists clenched.

They were in front of the hangar next to the hut. When they opened the door, an aeroplane was revealed.

It was a biplane with one wing above and another below the fuselage, just like the one Allison had arrived on earlier. But it was a little brighter than the air force plane. It had two seats, and two wheels at the front and one in the back. The aeroplane shone gold under the moonlight.

Allison brought a leather jacket, an aviator hat, and a pair of goggles that were hanging on the wall. She handed them all to Wil.

“Put these on.”

“What?”

As Wil watched blankly, Allison circled around the fuselage and inspected the main wings, the tail, the engine, and the pilot’s seats. She looked into the fuel tank to see how much fuel was left.

As Allison shut the cover over the engine and connected the batteries, Wil asked,

“What are you planning to do?”

After connecting the batteries, Allison shut the cover and looked at Wil. She took out her aviator cap and goggles from her bag.

“Isn’t it obvious? I mean, it’d be a shame to leave something so nice sitting here like this.”

“You mean… We’re going after them on this aeroplane?”

“We’d better hurry, or we’ll lose them.” Allison said matter-of-factly.

“…”

Wil was lost for words.

"It's going to be fine. I've piloted this model a few times before."

"Right. Wait, no! That's not the problem here!"

"Wil. Someone's just been kidnapped. By an armed group we know nothing about. And they escaped on an aeroplane. Is it so bad to tail them to their hideout and then report them to the city police force or the military police? If you think about it, this is the duty of all good citizens of Roxche. And it's not every day you have an aeroplane and someone who can pilot it at just the right time and place. We can't let this chance slip by."

"Yeah, but…"

"Besides, the plane's supposed to have been stolen already."

"…"

"We're just going to tail them for a bit. Just for a little while."

"Your 'little while' is different from everyone else's 'little while'. And you *say* we're just going to tail them, but-"

"I can go after them on my own, but it's always best to have as many witnesses as possible. Come with me, Wil."

"…We're really just going to tail them and come back, right?" Wil asked, meeting Allison's eyes.

"Yeah. Let's go." Allison said with a nod, holding out her hand towards Wil.

"All right. But don't do anything rash."

"Don't do anything rash. Got it."

Allison smiled. Wil found himself doing the same.

He then sighed to himself, shaking his head.

"Then again, this is already rash enough…"

"If you've sat yourself down, put on your seatbelt. Lock this belt, that belt, and the one over your waist into this buckle and adjust their lengths. Careful not to press the button; that releases all of the belts at once. Don't touch it until we get off."

Allison rattled off instructions to Wil from atop the lower wing as Wil sat in the back seat.

Two simple seats were built into the aeroplane. The skeleton and the metal plating of the fuselage were exposed from the seats, and at the seats were a control stick and a mind-numbing panel of instruments.

Wil was wearing the jacket Allison handed him, and had a muffler wrapped around his neck. He was strapped to his seat by the belts.

“Belts not too tight? Everything good? All right. You’re probably even safe to fly upside-down.”

“…Upside-down?”

“Yeah. But only if we have to. That control stick between your knees, the front rudder pedal, and that throttle lever on your left are connected to the controls in the front seat, but don’t touch them. If the smoke gets heavy or if you get cold, pull up your muffler some more. And put on gloves if your hands are cold. And hold on to this.”

Allison handed Wil a satchel. It looked like a long shopping bag with a handle, and inside were several cylindrical objects with string tied around them. Wil asked what they were.

“They’re smoke canisters. If you pull on one of the strings, they’ll activate all at once. So don’t drop them.”

Wil pulled the satchel close, uncertain. Allison pulled a leather aviator hat over his head. There were headphones over the ears, and in front was a mask that looked like a respirator.

“It’s something like a telephone. With this, the people in the two seats can talk to each other while they’re flying.”

Allison taught Wil how to use it. She told him that the mask was the microphone, and the button was by the handle. That his voice would only carry to Allison when he was holding down the button. That he should keep the cable connected to the machine next to his seat.

“Any questions?” She asked. Wil looked up at Allison, the microphone in front of his mouth, and said quietly,

“No. …It’s a little stuffy in here.”

“Then let’s get going. It’ll be cooler once we take off.” Allison said, jumping off the wing. She pulled off the restraints from the two front wheels and tossed them into the distance. Then, she returned to her seat and buckled herself in with a practiced hand. She pulled on a headset she had picked out earlier, and put on her hat and goggles over it.

The engine began to rumble. Then, ignition. Black smoke spewed from the exhaust pipe on the side of the fuselage as the aeroplane started. There was a loud noise as the propeller began to spin and generate wind. A faint tremor began to run up their backs.

The aeroplane began to taxi as though sliding. When they reached the airstrip, Allison stepped down on the right rudder pedal. The tail responded, and the nose began pointing to the right. The aeroplane continued at a slow speed.

<Can you hear me, Wil?> Allison asked through the communicator.

<I hear you. …Say, does the engine always sound so loud when you’re sitting inside an aeroplane?>

<It’s only going to get louder. Right now I’m just warming up the engine.>

Each time they cruised over a bump in the airstrip, the fuselage shook.

<Th, the plane isn't going to break, is it?>

<It'll be fine.>

The aeroplane reached the edge of the airstrip. This time, it began to go backwards. They could see the man sleeping in the hut.

<Just a little longer…>

Once they reached the opposite edge of the airstrip, Allison turned the aeroplane around once more. The nose was now pointed straight at the center of the airstrip.

<Here we go. Don't touch the controls.>

Before Wil could respond, the lever to his left slid as far forward as it could. The engine's rumbling turned into a roar. The wind of kicked up by the propellers raced overhead more powerfully than before. As the aeroplane began to move faster and faster, his body was pushed backwards by an incredible force.

<…>

The sound and shaking of the wheels grew more pronounced. Wil's expression stiffened.

Allison gently pushed forward the control stick. The back wheel left the ground, and the fuselage was now parallel to the airstrip. They picked up speed.

Without warning, the deafening noise and the trembling stopped. The engine continued to roar and the plane continued to shake very slightly, but it almost felt as though everything had gone silent. Like a balloon released from a child's grip, the aeroplane gently left the ground with wind in its wings.

<…>

The coniferous trees that covered Wil's line of sight like a pair of walls on either side suddenly disappeared. The dark forest and the farmland and the roads around it were below them now. The fields around that scene came into view. It was as though the world was sinking below them.

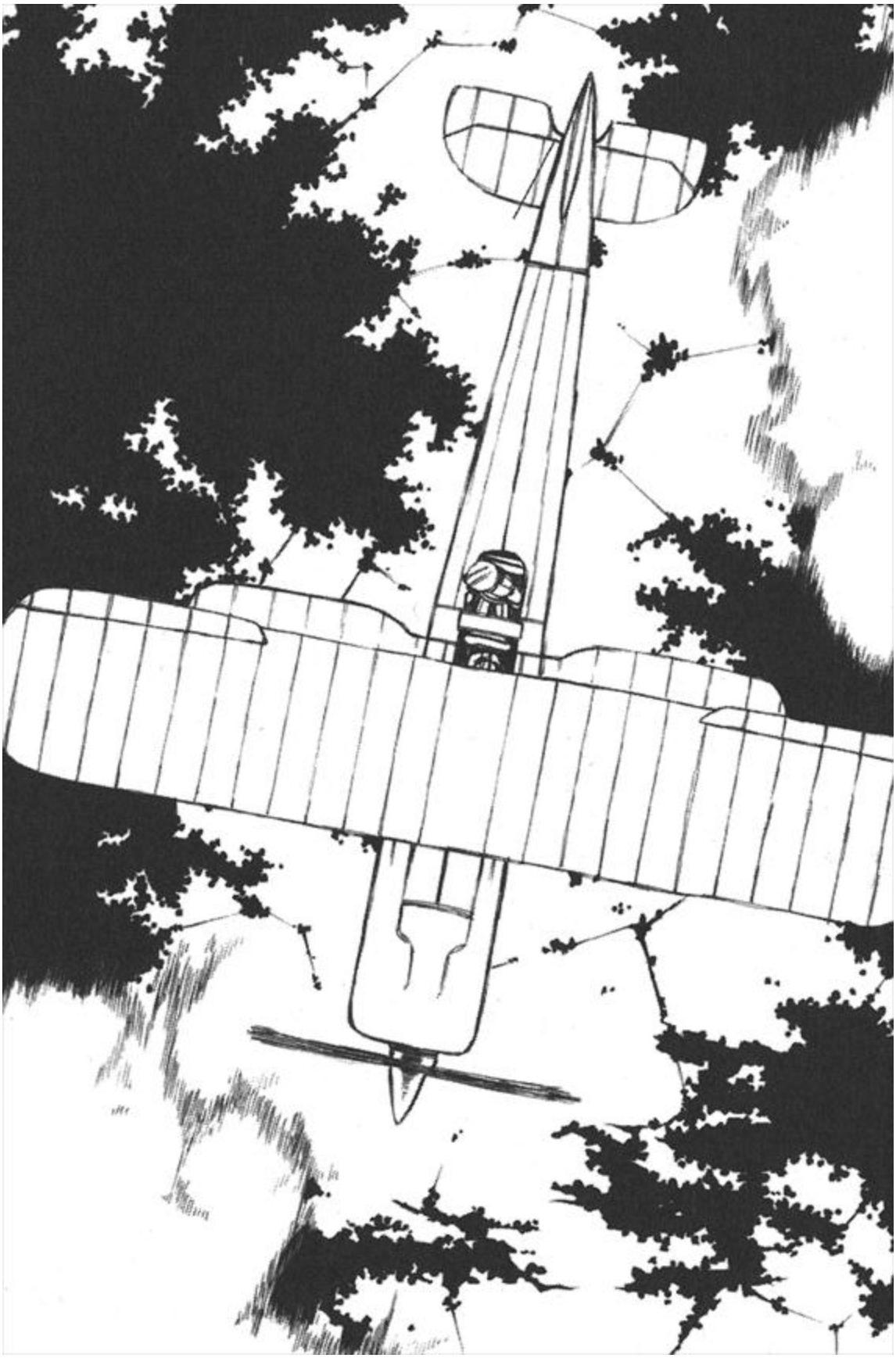
<I'm swerving right.>

At the sound of Allison's familiar voice, the aeroplane began to turn to the right. Wil, who was looking to his left, found the ground disappearing from his eyes, replaced by a pale blue sky. He looked to his right in surprise, and saw fields and trees slowly passing by his eyes.

The plane flew parallel to the ground once more, and then ascended slightly.

Wil looked ahead. He could see the fuselage, and the wings on either side. Over the windshield, just out of arm's reach, was the back of Allison's head.

<What do you think, Wil?> She asked. Wil answered her honestly.



<I'm a little scared. This is really high up. I can't believe there's nothing under my feet. Although there really *is* nothing there. I can't calm down. Whenever the plane swerves, I feel like I'm going to fall off. But it's not a bad feeling. The view is beautiful. I've never seen the fields from so high up before.>

<Wil, you said you wanted to ride on a plane before, right? When did you send that letter again?>

<Around this time last year. The fourteenth line on the second page. It was just wishful thinking back then, but now that I'm actually on an aeroplane…>

<How do you feel?>

<It's even better than I imagined, Allison. So this is the kind of world you experience every day.> Wil said cheerfully. A smile rose to Allison's lips.

<Welcome to the sky, Wil.>

<All right. Let's follow that seaplane.>

<About that. Do you know which way they went?> Wil asked. The seaplane was already long out of sight.

<We just have to go in the same general direction. We're in the sky, after all; there aren't any obstacles in our way. Aeroplanes fly in straight lines to save fuel. We just follow the compass. We'll catch up to them if we speed up; this model's faster than theirs.>

<I see.>

<Don't worry. Just enjoy the view for now.>

Just as Allison told him, Wil turned and looked down at the ground below. The ground seemed to glow white, slowly but surely flowing beneath them. The engines were still roaring at a constant volume, but Wil had already forgotten just how loud it was.

<…>

Wil continued to gaze upon the moonlit fields, forests, rivers, and lakes. He did not get bored. When his neck ached because he looked to the right for too long, he switched sides and looked to the left. Then right again.

"Beautiful…" He mumbled, without pressing the call button.

<There!>

Wil was taken by surprise by Allison's sudden cry. The plane was still flying.

<What? Oh, right.>

<They're ahead. Can you see?> Allison asked, pushing the right control stick. The nose slowly began to point down. Directly in front of the upper wing Wil could see a distinctive curve. It was the seaplane that had taken off from the woods.

<I see it.>

<We're going to tail them from below and behind.>

Allison lowered the nose even more. Wil could feel the belts pulling his body back into his seat. He held tightly onto the satchel of smoke canisters so it wouldn't float away.

The control stick returned to its original position. This time, Wil's backside was pressed against his seat. They descended, then flew level again. The seaplane was above and ahead of them. He could see it when he tilted his head upwards. Its black shape was clear in the pale blue backdrop.

<We're good now. Anyway, I've never seen that model before.>

<Won't they spot us from there?> Wil asked anxiously.

<We're clear. This is their blind spot.> Allison replied, confident.

Chapter 3: Those Who Remained

Some time passed since Allison and Wil first began tailing the seaplane. The two planes' positions remained the same.

Wil, who had been keeping his eyes trained on the seaplane for fear of losing sight of it, eventually turned his gaze downward.

"What?"

He was shocked. The fields, forests, and plains that had been there until not too long ago had been replaced by something flat and grey. Wil could not tell what it was. He fell into thought.

The strange grey plain suddenly came to an end, and forests passed below them once more. Wil turned his head back as far as he could.

"What was that? Not a desert… a lake? Or… H, hey!"

The moment Wil realized what had happened, his eyes turned to dinner plates. He turned back and shouted into the transmitter.

<Allison! Allison!>

<What's wrong?>

<We just flew over a river. It was a big one. It must have been the Lutoni! We're in the buffer zone right now. We've crossed the border!>

In contrast to Wil's panic, Allison replied with utter nonchalance.

<Yeah. We just crossed the border.>

<…>

Wil said nothing, his finger still holding down the push-to-talk button. Allison went on to add:

<It's pretty much what I expected.>

<Th, this is illegal entry…>

<Yeah. Oh, the technical term in this case is 'violation of airspace'.>

<…>

The aeroplane continued west-northwest.

<We're just following them for a little bit. All we have to do is figure out where exactly they're headed. And besides, *they're* violating enemy airspace, too. *And* they're kidnappers. If we announce that we witnessed people from Sou Be-Il kidnapping an old Roxchean man, we'll make headlines.>

There was a ten-second lull in the conversation. The roar of the engine continued.

<Allison, you said earlier that you'd never seen that plane before. I remember you wrote in a letter once: You know almost every Roxchean aeroplane model. You knew that the seaplane was from Cross-River the moment you saw it take off. You knew we'd fly over the Lutoni River if we chased after it. And you also figured out that this wasn't just a simple kidnapping case taking place in Roxche. You knew this was something big. And you also figured that our stealing this aeroplane and entering Sou Be-Il airspace is probably going to be easy to cover up.>

<Wil…>

<What is it?>

<You got it right. You're really clever. This must be one of those emergency situations, right?>

<I wish I'd noticed sooner…>

This time, they paused for seven seconds.

<It's okay. We'll just see where they land and go back. We've still got enough fuel left, too. We're fine for now.>

<…>

No matter how far back Wil turned his head, he could not see the Lutoni River. And just as he turned his gaze back to the seaplane, something happened.

Lights came on on the seaplane's wings. A green light on the tip of its right wing, and a red light on the tip of its left wing. Underneath the tail was a white light, and at the tip of the tail was a red light.

The man-made lights stood out even more around the dark silhouette of the plane.

<Allison. The lights…>

<I see them. I wonder what they're for.>

Allison frowned.

<Hold on tight, okay?>

Allison tilted the aeroplane left, right, forward, and backward, turning her head to survey all directions. On the moonlit land was nothing but a great plain dotted with aged trees.

"No villages nearby… and I don't think they're planning to land…" She mumbled to herself.

Wil spoke up.

<The seaplane's getting further.>

The seaplane suddenly sped up, slowly ascending.

Allison didn't even try to follow it with her eyes. She continued to turn her sights in all directions.

"…"

Her eyes stopped at some point diagonally ahead of them. There was a very, very small object at the end of her gaze.

"I knew it!"

The object grew bigger and bigger.

<Make sure you're properly belted in, Wil. And make sure you hold tight onto that satchel.>

<Got it.>

<Good. We're in for a rough ride.>

<Why?>

Allison did not answer. She tightened her grip around the control stick and the throttle lever.

The object drew closer and closer with incredible speed.

"Not yet… Not yet…"

A second later, a pair of wings came into view. Another second later, the windshield glinting in the moonlight became visible.

"Now!"

Allison pushed the control stick far to the left, and kicked the lever near her left foot with all her might. The aeroplane suddenly swerved left and downwards as though it had hit something.

"Whoa!" Wil cried. Long, thin lines of light flew towards him and passed just to his right. Then, a dark shadow quickly entered and left his line of sight. Allison and Wil's aeroplane broke out of its descent and swerved again, this time towards the right with the nose pointed upwards.

<What? What's going on here?> Wil asked desperately, even though his head was spinning and his body was being pushed against his seatbelts.

<Cross-River fighter planes. They spotted us.> Allison said calmly, flying the plane in a circle. And she added,

<But how did they find us?>

<They noticed us? Wh, what do we do?>

The black aeroplane that flew past them tilted, leaning perpendicular to the ground, making a wide left turn. Its speed was on a different level from that of the seaplane. The black

plane flew as though sliding across the boundary between the pale blue sky and the dark ground.

<We're going to have to run this time. That black plane is a fighter craft.> Allison answered, glaring at the aeroplane that was turning towards them. The seaplane had already extinguished all its lights and was flying away as fast as it could.

Allison checked her altitude meter and looked down to check something else.

When she looked up to the right, she saw the black plane. It had flown out of its arc and was pointed straight at her and Wil. It began to draw closer.

<Hold on tight.> Allison said, and pulled the control stick parallel to the ground. The aeroplane spun with the fuselage as the axis, and stopped in place upside-down.

Wil, suspended in his seat, hurriedly grabbed the satchel before it could fall. Allison was looking to the left. She was staring at the black plane, waiting for something.

There was a flash of light near the black plane.

Two bursts of light, shining like camera flashes. The aeroplane spewed out machine gun fire. For every four shots there was one tracer shot, which emitted light and drew lines in the air.

The two streams of light cut through the air, thin smoke trailing behind them. But Allison and Wil's aeroplane was not there.

"Ugh!"

With Wil's silent scream, the aeroplane began to fall. Before the fighter opened fire, Allison had pulled back the control stick with all her might. The plane began to drop, still upside-down.

The black plane stopped firing. It then made a wide left turn and began to circle again, preparing to open fire once more.

<Wil! Get ready!> Allison cried, and maneuvered the aeroplane back to upright position. The sudden increase in gravity pushed their backs against their seats.

<G, get ready? For what?> Wil asked, surprised.

<The smoke canisters. Hold the satchel outside the fuselage and get ready to pull on the string, okay?>

Wil did as he was told, hanging the satchel handle on the lever inside the cockpit. He hung the satchel itself off the left side of the fuselage. Reaching out with his left hand into the satchel, which was suspended sideways because of the wind pressure, he groped for the string.

<Got it! Now what?>

<Just hold still. Don't move.> Allison replied, looking back. The aeroplane began to slowly ascend.

<When I give you the signal, pull on the string. I'll take care of things somehow afterwards.>

<'Somehow'?>

The black plane finished its turn. With its incredible speed, it immediately opened fire on Allison and Wil from behind and above.

<Now!> Allison commanded.

Wil pulled on the string, not knowing what was about to happen. The moment he did so, the satchel expanded. Grey smoke escaping the bundle of canisters flowed out of the satchel and began to trail behind them.

Without warning, Allison swerved left and began to descend. The aeroplane spun with the smoke again and again, spiraling towards the ground.

The black plane slowed down and quickly swerved right, flying directly over the spiral-shaped smoke.

<We're going to crash!> Wil said in a near-scream.

<We're okay! I'm doing this on purpose! When I give you the signal, drop the satchel!>

Although his head was shaking and his body was being pushed into the seat, Wil followed Allison's orders and reached for the satchel hanging from the lever.

They quickly lost altitude. The image of the ground spinning overhead grew larger and larger with each spin.

And without warning, the spinning stopped.

<Now!>

Wil pulled the satchel handle off the lever. The satchel flew off, falling with a trail of smoke. It soon hit the ground, bounced into the air, and fell once more as it scattered its contents on the ground.

"What?"

Wil's eyes widened in shock.

Just within arm's reach were the kind of sights he normally saw out of two-story buildings. The plane was flying just above the ground, only several meters from the surface with its nose pointed upwards.

<What do you think? Success!> Allison said triumphantly.

At that moment,

Crash!

They heard something breaking underneath them. The fuselage shook up and down.

They had hit a power line.

There was a narrow road in the middle of the plain, and wooden utility poles were lined up along it. The wheels and landing gear were caught in the two lines. Although the aeroplane ended up snapping the power lines, it also lost its wheels.

The aeroplane tilted forward and slammed towards the ground.

"Eek!"

Allison pulled on the control stick. Just as the aeroplane began to ascend once more, the legs and the fuselage hit the ground.

The legs broke, and the propeller spun against the earth until it bent. The fuselage slid down the field, leaving a gash in the ground, and the lower wings snapped and broke.

The fuselage continued skidding down the plain. Once they lost speed, the engine slammed into a small mound of dirt and the fuselage made a half-turn, bringing them to a full stop.

Allison undid her belts and climbed on top of her seat, looking back. Then, she undid Wil's belts as he sat there with shock clear under his goggles, and yelled,

"Get up! We have to run!"

Wil stood. Allison pulled him off the fuselage. The ground was right next to them.

"Run!"

"Whoa!"

Wil stumbled for a moment, but he ran with all his strength. Allison ran alongside him, hitting him on the back several times.

About five seconds later, the aeroplane exploded.

A red mass of flames blossomed from the crash site, and the impact demolished the front half of the fuselage. What remained began to burn, black smoke spewing into the air.

Wil and Allison ran for their lives, taking cover behind a tree that happened to be there. Tiny pieces of shrapnel hit the trunk. Allison and Wil sat, leaning against the tree. Wil was gasping for breath.

The aeroplane continued to burn, a ball of bright red in a world of pale blue.

"Are you okay, Wil? You *look* all right."

"I, I'm fine… Wh, what about you, Allison?"

"I'm okay. But the aeroplane's gone. And things were going so well back there, too."

Allison knelt with a disappointed look, poking out her head partway from behind the tree.

"What were you trying to do?" Wil asked, looking up at her as he sat on the ground.

“Playing dead.”

“What?”

Allison leaned down and looked at Wil.

“I learned it from a first lieutenant in my unit. It’s called playing dead. A trick to use on your enemies. When the enemy’s shooting at you, or if you’re not armed, you use smoke canisters to make it look like you’ve been shot. Then, the enemy plane’s going to back off because they don’t want to get caught in the explosion. That’s when you get yourself into a controlled spin and dive down. You pretend to crash and escape the enemy’s line of sight. It’s hard to see from above when you’re flying really close to the ground like that. Afterwards, all you have to do is run. If we’d just crossed the Lutoni River, they wouldn’t have been able to follow us… I was so sure I could pull it off! Who the heck thought it was a good idea to put up power lines in a place like this?! What kind of backwater countryside needs electricity, anyway?!” Allison complained.

“…”

In contrast, Wil’s expression was solemn.

“And also-”

Allison suddenly stopped mid-sentence. There was an explosive roar as the black fighter plane flew by overhead at incredible speed. It swerved to the right and disappeared.

“You! Yeah, you! Come on down here, damn it!” Allison yelled to the sky and the moon, her fists clenched tight.

Wil hung his head, tired, and sighed loudly.

“Whew…”

* * *

<This is Crow. Duck, do you copy? The Cross-River aeroplane is off your tail. Explosion confirmed. I repeat, enemy aircraft has been shot down. Explosion confirmed. Over.>

<This is Duck. Roger that. Escort this craft back to the base. That is all.>

<This is Crow. The Roxche aircraft clearly invaded our airspace. Requesting permission to contact headquarters to dispatch an investigation team. Over.>

<There’s no need. Return to base. You are not permitted to ask questions.>

<…But->

<Second lieutenant. I’m only going to repeat myself once. You are not permitted to ask questions. All you have to do is follow orders. End communications.>

“…Damn it.”

* * *

Sunlight began to drive away the moon. The pale blue sky started to burn red from the east.

Morning came and color returned to the world. The plants of the fields were green, the sky was blue, and the charred remnants were black.

The crashed aeroplane had been burnt to a crisp. About the only recognizable parts left were the tips of the upper wing and the back end of the fuselage.

"Morning already? That was quick. I guess that's summer for you."

Wil was sitting against a tree.

"I can't believe no one's coming. Somebody's not taking their job seriously." Allison complained, hiding behind a stump as she watched the wreckage.

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Allison and Wil ran away from the flaming wreckage. Then, they took cover in the grass and behind the trees, where they could still see the burned-out remains of the aeroplane.

If the Sou Be-Il Air Force had shot them down after marking them as intruders, they would probably send in an investigation team. So Allison kept watch on the plane. When Wil asked her what she would do if they really did come for the wreckage, Allison answered,

"I'll wing it."

And in the end, all that came to them was morning.

"What do we do, Allison? We can't just wait here forever."

The sun rose up above the forest, and the birds were chirping. Wil looked at Allison with fatigue in his eyes. Allison replied as she wound her wristwatch.

"You're right."

"And where are we, anyway? Do you have any idea?"

"Well, we flew about this far after we crossed the Lutoni, then we tried to run away for a while, so I think we're probably inside or just on the edge of the buffer zone."

"Either way, this is illegal entry."

"C'mon, there's no use getting hung up on things like that. Let's be more productive. Think about what we should do next." Allison said cheerfully. Wil looked up at her.

"Yeah…"

Allison smiled. Wil continued.

"Realistically speaking, without that aeroplane, we're stuck here."

"That we are."

"So let's try and get to the closest village and explain ourselves somehow."

"How?"

"We'll leave out the part about getting shot down. We can say we got lost during a flight and ended up crashing here. Or we could say we got into an accident and ask for official protection. If we go and turn ourselves in first, they won't assume that we're spies. All we can do after that is ask to be sent back to Roxche."

"…"

"Allison?"

"Sad, but I guess you're right. Do you think there's a village nearby?"

"I'm not sure. I've never seen a detailed map of Sou Be-Il… But in Roxche's case, there aren't any settlements near the buffer zone. Twenty kilometers away, at the closest."

"I see. Then I guess we'll have to walk it."

"Walking it is."

As the sun rose, so did the temperature.

Allison and Wil were walking across the plains, headed west. Knee-length grass was growing on the flat terrain. From time to time they saw groves of trees.

The road with the utility poles stretched from north to south, so following it was not an option.

The more they walked, the hotter it became. They took off their hats and jackets and draped them over their shoulders.

Allison had tied her bag around her waist. Wil was carrying a small package. It was an emergency kit that had been stored in the back of the aeroplane's fuselage. Thankfully, it escaped the flames unharmed.

"If there *is* a village around here…" Allison began.

"Yeah?" Wil asked from behind.

"If we there *is* a village, maybe they'll have aeroplanes and an airstrip."

"Maybe. But what's that got to do with us?"

"I was thinking we should borrow one for the ride home." Allison said with a grin.

"…"

“Isn’t that a great idea?”

“I’m not sure about that, Allison. …I guess you’re still thinking of trying to solve things yourself, huh. Have you thought about how you’re going to return the aeroplane later?”

“Well, uh… I’d love to give it back if I could.”

“Say, Wil.” Allison said as they walked. No matter how far they went, the scenery around them would not change. All they saw was green. They did not see any roads anywhere.

“What is it?” Wil answered from behind her.

“What do you think the treasure is?”

“Hm? What did you say?” Wil asked. Allison turned back to him and repeated herself angrily.

“That treasure. The one the old man was talking about. Don’t tell me you forgot already.”

“Oh… right. Things were so hectic I wasn’t even thinking about it.”

“Do you think it’s gold and silver? Did you by any chance read anything about any ancient king who hid his stash in this area to help him get back to power?”

“I don’t think so. …There’s something else that’s bothering me right now.”

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking, ‘At what point should I have stopped Allison? When we were chasing down the car on the school motorcycle? When we were interrogating the officer? When we stole the aeroplane? Or when we crossed the border?’.”

“That’s a tough question. But…”

“‘But’?”

“It’s not like getting an answer to that’s gonna help us.”

“You’re right. Next time, I’ll do whatever it takes to stop you.”

“Sure.”

“You answered so quickly… I said this earlier, but I bet you’re still planning to pull something big, right?”

“…”

“I really like how stubborn you are.”

“…”

“What’s wrong?”

There was a little creek on the plains, cutting a shallow trench through the surface of the earth.

The creek was small enough to cross in one bound. Wil was sitting on the slope, just away from the damp soil. The trees that happened to be standing nearby provided him decent shelter.

Allison finished filling their water canteen and took a seat beside him.

Wil opened their emergency kit. Inside was a small mirror, a note containing directions on what mindset to keep during a crisis, a tin of liver paté, and some crackers.

They ate in silence. The meal quickly came to an end. Allison bit off about half of their supply of chocolate and handed the rest to Wil. He finished it and took the water canteen.

After a gulp of water, Wil sighed.

"I'm feeling a lot better now. I'm full, too."

Allison expressed relief and added,

"Sitting by a creek like this with you, Wil… it feels like we're out on a picnic. Remember? We used to go on picnics all the time when we were younger. I mean, I guess we're still young, but I'm talking about when we were ten or so."

"When we were younger, huh?"

Wil lay down on the slope with his jacket underneath.

"Now that I think about it, you were always really rash back then, too."

"Was I?" Allison said, playing dumb. Wil looked up. The sky shone between the branches and leaves overhead.

"Don't try to say you forgot. Climbing up trees we weren't supposed to climb, going out in the middle of heavy snow—even though we weren't allowed to—and getting buried, climbing under the floorboards to catch all the rats in the kitchen and getting stuck, trying to climb down from the roof on a rope and ending up hanging upside-down…"

"I guess stuff like that happened."

"Falling asleep in the sheep pens and making the entire village go on a wild goose chase, blocking an irrigation canal to make a pond and flooding the fields and the roads, challenging a bully who was older than you to a duel, climbing up the cliff by the river and getting stuck up there, passing through four villages by bicycle, building a secret base underground and nearly getting killed in a cave-in…"

"Really?"

"Walking behind you like this just made me feel nostalgic, so I started to wonder why. Then all these memories started popping up clearly like it was yesterday. You were always the one to dive in head-first. I always tried to stop you, but ended up following you. And in the

end, both of us would get in trouble. Every time that happened, we had to clean all the windows in the house. It was the worst when we had to do it in winter."

"Yeah, I remember that really well. But you know, Wil. I was always really grateful that you came with me every time."

"Really?" Wil said in shock, turning to look at Allison. She was smiling.

"Yeah. Without you, it'd have taken twice as long to wipe down all the windows."

"…"

Wil looked up at the sky dotted between branches once more and mumbled to himself.

"I'd give anything for this mishap to just end in us wiping some windows… I guess that's not possible, huh?"

At some point, Wil had fallen asleep by the creek.

Allison, who had also been asleep, opened her eyes. Realizing that she had dozed off, she quickly sat up. Cautiously surveying her surroundings, she left the shade of the tree and looked up at the sun hanging in the middle of the sky.

She woke up Wil.

They continued walking on the plain. They walked on and on without a destination, until their shoes began to smell like grass. There was neither a village nor a house in sight.

When Wil asked Allison for the time, she replied that it was the same time as earlier.

"There must be a big commotion back at the dormitories right about now." Wil said, dejected.

"Hm? Probably. But no one died in the fire, and the officer's going to keep quiet. So maybe everyone'll just think we left on a secret trip together."

"I'm glad it's summer break right now. If this was during the school year, I'd have been suspended for sure. Expelled, if I was unlucky."

"That's pretty strict. But having rules isn't necessarily a bad thing. If rules didn't exist, we'd never feel the thrill of breaking them."

"…Wait! D'you think they called home? Wouldn't everyone get worried?"

"I don't think so. They probably wouldn't know about me… if they don't look into things too deep, anyway. I hope they don't."

"Phew…"

"And Wil, this might end up sparking one of those oh-so-rare international incidents. Is this really the time to be worrying about school?"

"Right…"

"Don't worry. It'll work out somehow."

"…Whenever you say that, I get scared things'll actually happen that way."

"Oh? Why would you get *scared*?"

"I think we'll probably have to camp out again tonight." Allison said as they walked.

"I expected as much. It's a good thing it's summer right now…"

"I took part in an outdoor camping exercise in the snow in the middle of winter before. It wasn't too bad."

"I'd prefer not to have that experience."

"Really?"

No matter how far they walked, the scenery around them remained the same. A great plain acting as backdrop to the occasional grove of trees.

"From the looks of these trees, I'm guessing this area used to be a farmland." Wil said quietly. The boundary of the little forest to their right was drawn in a perfectly straight line. It was proof of human intervention.

"Yeah. But now it's nothing but nature." Allison said, looking around.

"There might have been villages in the area until the Great War. Apparently this area was home to people who lived off fishing in the Lutoni River, and it was a vacation spot for kings and nobles. The villagers probably all fled during the war and returned afterwards. But now that the buffer zone is here…"

"…They must have been forcibly relocated, and the area's totally empty. But that doesn't mean this place is desolate. Look over there." Allison replied, pointing to their right.

Wil looked at the spot she was indicating. There was a slender animal covered in light brown fur, looking at them from the edge of the woods. It was about the height of a child.

"A fawn… it looks just like the ones back in Raputoa."

"It's still small." Allison said, approaching the animal. It did not try to run. The fawn only looked at Allison, who approached with her arms spread wide.

"Don't worry. We're not going to eat you." She said softly.

"They're actually pretty tasty. I tried some venison skewers at the festival." Wil said from behind.

"How could you say that, Wil?" Allison replied, pouting. Wil shrugged.

The fawn took two steps backwards.

“C’mere. You don’t have to be scared. Are you all by yourself?”

Allison took another step forward.

“!”

Wil was jolted by her last question. He quickly shouted,

“Allison! No!”

“Huh?”

The moment Allison looked back, there was a loud noise. Something was crashing through the foliage.

It was the fawn’s mother. The doe charged towards Allison in the blink of an eye and reared back.

“Look out-”

Wil pulled Allison back as he shouted.

There was a dull *thud*. The doe’s right hoof only grazed Allison and scratched her jacket. But her left hoof slammed down on Wil’s temple.

Wil pulled Allison back several steps and crumpled to the ground. Allison was dragged along and fell on her backside.

“Wil?”

She turned to her right and looked at Wil, who was lying in the grass. Blood was flowing from his forehead, covering his closed eyes, the bridge of his nose, and his mouth.

“Wil! Wil!”

There was no answer. Allison turned to face the snorting doe.

She thrust her left hand into the bag at her waist. She groped through its contents, grasping the heaviest object at the very back before pulling it out.

“You…!”

It was her handgun, this time loaded with a magazine. Allison pulled the slide and pushed it forward. The first round was loaded into the firing chamber. Still sitting on the ground, Allison thrust her right arm forward. She held the safety, which was on the back of the grip, and put her finger on the trigger.

“Even *I* won’t miss at this range!”

The doe stared at Allison. Allison stared at the doe.

“D, do you… really taste that great?”

She asked, slowly putting pressure on her trigger finger.

"Ugh…"

Her grip on the trigger weakened.

The fawn came up to its mother and began to rub its face against her. Ignoring Allison, who was still pointing her gun at them, the doe turned to look at the fawn.

Mother and child slowly turned away. They bounded off into the forest.

Allison lowered her left arm, re-armed the safety with her right hand, and turned back to Wil.

"Wil!"

The handgun fell to the ground.

"Wil, can you hear me?"

She gingerly turned Wil over onto his back and pushed back his bangs. Her hand was sticky.

"Wil!" She cried. This time, he responded weakly with his eyes still shut.

"Yeah… Are you okay, Allison?"

"Yes! All thanks to you, Wil. But your head is bleeding…"

"Yeah. I feel kind of dizzy."

Wil fell silent again.

"Wil!"

Allison's eyes widened in panic. But she quickly regained her composure and began mumbling to herself.

"Calm down, Staff Sergeant Allison Whittington. When treating an injured soldier, first check his pulse and breathing…"

Allison put her index and middle finger on Wil's neck. There was still a pulse. Next, she put her fingers in front of his mouth and nose. He was still breathing.

With a sigh of relief, Allison took out a white handkerchief and a water canteen from her bag. Wil's injury was on his left temple, near his hairline. Blood was slowly dripping from the thumb-length gash.

Glaring at the wound, Allison poured water over it. As the blood washed away, the injury became visible. It was not very deep. It began to bleed again, concealing the gash once more.

Allison poured water on the gash again, and placed the handkerchief against it. She pressed down on it and turned around. She placed Wil's head on her knees, elevating his head.

She sat, breathing heavily, for some time. Blood began to stain the handkerchief, which was folded into four layers.

"Please…"

The stain stopped growing.

With her left hand, Allison pulled over Wil's jacket from the ground. She took out the muffler from the pocket, and with one end in her mouth, folded it in half. She wrapped it around Wil's head. Once she was finished, she pressed down on the handkerchief and tied the muffler.

At the end of the first-aid session, Allison's shoulders were sagging with fatigue. Wil was still lying in her lap, unconscious but his breathing steady.

Allison looked around. There was no one on the plains.

"…"

Embracing Wil's head, she shut her blue eyes tightly. Blood stained her golden hair.

Not even hugging his head, slapping him lightly, or smacking him a little more violently, would wake him.

Allison thought of pouring out the contents of the water canteen over him, but held herself back. She wiped the blood from Wil's face with her damp sleeve.

Afterwards, she looked around, checked the position of the sun, and decided to walk carrying Wil on her back.

She put his jacket on him and tied her own around her waist. She laid down over Wil, who was lying on the ground, and held him by the shoulders to flip both him and herself over at once.

"Hah!"

With a spirited cry, she got to her feet with Wil on her back and began walking west.

Sweat trickled down Allison's brow, then down her cheeks. She was walking. Her breathing was slightly ragged, but her eyes were focused straight ahead.

Occasionally she stopped and addressed the boy on her back, but she received no answer. Allison steadied herself and made sure of his breaths on her neck.

"There."

Fixing her hold on Wil, Allison began to walk again.

As thought in an attempt to hinder her, the grassy plains gave way to a rolling meadow. She was going uphill.

"Ugh."

“I don’t believe this.”

“Hmph.”

“Damn it.”

Allison climbed the hill, complaining all the way.

At the top of the mound, her line of sight was expanded.

“…”

She saw a deserted plain and another hill up ahead.

“Urgh… ——————!”

With an outpouring of obscenities, Allison began to walk once more towards the sun.

Three hills later.

“…”

There was a forest in front of her. Due west was a dense, uncultivated wood with nothing in the way of visibility.

“Which way, Wil?”

There was no answer.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

Checking Wil’s breathing once more, Allison mumbled to herself and looked left and right. And she began to walk along the edge of the forest in the direction she had looked in last.

* * *

“Or… maybe it *did* matter?” Allison mumbled to herself. She tried talking to Wil, but all she got in response was his steady breathing.

Allison stared at the house standing before them. She had walked a long way along the forest, turning west along with the boundary of the plains.

And standing at the edge of the plain, which was dotted with forests and covered with weeds, was a lone house.

It was a wooden structure with a red brick chimney standing in the middle. The windows were all intact, and the greenery around the house was neatly in order.

The house stood lonely in the lush background.

“I wonder if someone’s inside. Probably. A Westerner.”

Allison put a hand to the pouch at her waist. She checked for her handgun.

With her eyes on the house, she began to walk. She and Wil would be clearly visible to anyone looking outside from the building.

There was a little hut next to the house, used for storing firewood. Beside it was an axe. In the well was a container filled with clean water.

The curtains were drawn over the windows, so it was impossible to look inside. Allison slowly made her way towards the southern side of the house.

On the other side was a small vegetable patch. From the look of the colorful summer vegetables growing there, it was clear that someone was maintaining it.

Allison stood before the door. The floorboards creaked loudly under her weight.

She waited for several seconds, but no one came outside. She heard nothing from behind the door.

Taking a deep breath, Allison knocked on the door several times. Ten seconds passed.

"…Is no one home?"

Allison raised her hand to knock again, but stopped.

She took hold of the doorknob and pushed. The door opened without resistance. Beyond it she could see the interior of the house.

Beside the door was a large room with a dining table. Next to it was an iron stove which ran on firewood, used for heating and cooking. Some tableware had been neatly placed on the cupboard in the corner. Next to it was a water tank and a sink. In the middle was a brick fireplace, the chimney extending all the way up to the ceiling. Beside it was a small cupboard.

The hall that extended from the wall was connected to the rooms further inside. It was too dark to see clearly, but the hallway was quite long.

"Not bad for a house in the boonies." Allison said, looking inside. Suddenly, she heard a groan.

"Ugh… urgh…"

She flinched, but quickly realized that the sound was coming from near her ear.

"Wil?"

She shook him, but there was no response.

Allison stepped inside, shut the door, and laid Wil against the cabinet next to the fireplace.

Stretching her back and shoulders, now free from their heavy burden, Allison swung her arms around to shake off the numbness. She wiped off the sweat on her forehead and neck with her shirt and reached out to touch Wil's face as he lay weakly against the cupboard.

“Wil, can you hear me?”

She hit him lightly.

“Wake up, Wil. It’s morning. The matrons are calling. It’s almost time for class.”

Wil would not open his eyes.

“You sleepyhead…”

Allison slowly unfurled the muffler she had used in place of a bandage. She tried to peel off the handkerchief, but she left it alone when she saw that it was stuck to the wound.

Taking off Wil’s jacket, Allison rolled it up into a ball. She slowly laid Wil on the floor, using the jacket as a pillow. Then, she untied her own jacket from around her waist and covered him with it.

Allison looked at the cupboard next to the fireplace. After a moment’s hesitation, she began to thoroughly search it, starting from the bottom.

“I hope they at least have disinfectant.”

Each time she rifled through a drawer, she closed it as soon as she noted that there was nothing she needed inside. Then, she moved on to the next one.

It was when she had just opened the fourth drawer.

Bang!

The door opened with a crash.

“Huh?”

Allison turned around in surprise.

“Tims! Levin!” A woman cried, rushing inside.

She was a relatively skinny woman, looking to be over fifty years of age. Her black hair, streaked with grey, was tied up in a bun. Over her dark green dress was an apron, messy from garden work.

The woman stepped inside with a smile. But the moment she saw Allison, looking back at her, the smile disappeared.

The woman took a deep breath and composed herself.

“Who are you?”

She was speaking standard Bezelese—the official language of Sou Be-Il.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

“…”

Allison glared back at the woman and slowly reached towards the bag at her waist. She reached inside.

"I'm going to ask you again. Who are you? Don't you understand what I'm saying to you? Or are you…?"

Allison pointed the gun at the woman. She did not place her finger on the trigger. The safety was still armed.

In spite of this, the woman did not so much as flinch. She continued to speak, her eyes trained on Allison.

"Are you from Cross-River? I suppose you must be. You're a Roxchean. Did you cross the Lutoni River?"

"…"

"This is my house. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Allison clenched her teeth, slowly putting her thumb on the safety.

"Yes. You're right. We're very sorry." Wil said. He was speaking Bezelese.

Allison turned around in shock. The woman, also surprised, watched as Wil got up in front of the fireplace. She was again surprised by his bloodied handkerchief and shirt.

Slowly getting to his feet, Wil leaned against the fireplace. Allison's jacket fell to the floor.

"Wil!"

Allison turned towards him. Wil weakly opened his eyes and spoke in standard Bezelese.

"Put down the gun, Allison. We're the ones who're trespassing… This house belongs to the lady."

With the bloodied handkerchief pressed against his forehead, Wil turned to the woman.

"We're very sorry. Our aeroplane crash-landed, so we walked all the way here. We're very sorry for barging into your house…"

The woman looked at Wil without a word. He closed his eyes again.

Allison rushed over to him and caught him before he could fall.

"Your friend is injured… Did he hurt his forehead?"

Supporting Wil, Allison glared at the woman and spoke in fluent standard Bezelese.

"Yes. We need medicine, food, and a place to rest."

"So you speak Bezelese, too. I have medicine. I have food and extra beds, as well. But this is my house. What if I were to refuse you?" The woman replied.

"I'd shoot you." Allison answered immediately, clutching her gun.

The woman smiled.

“Are all people Cross-River as barbaric as you?”

“No. But right now…”

At Allison’s immediate answer, the woman responded quietly.

“Bring your friend. I’ll let you use a bed.”

There were a total of three rooms in the house.

The woman led Allison and the unconscious Wil(who was on Allison’s back) to one of the rooms. When she opened the door, light flooded inside.

In the room was a simple single bed, an empty dresser, and a desk. The room showed no signs of use, but on the beautiful wood-framed bed was a clean mattress, sheets, and summer blankets.

Allison slowly laid Wil on the bed.

The woman stepped outside for a moment, and brought back a basin filled with water, a clean piece of cloth, and a small wooden box. She sat on a round chair by the bed and gingerly peeled the handkerchief from Wil’s forehead. Then, she disinfected the gash, put gauze over it, and wrapped a bandage around his head. The woman finally checked Wil’s temperature and his pulse. She did all this with expert ease.

“His gash will heal. It’s not a very deep wound, so he won’t need stitches, either, although it might leave a scar. And I don’t think he has a fever.” The woman said, washing her hands.

“Thank-”

“What happened to him?” The woman asked, just as Allison was about to speak.

“Oh, uh…”

“Was he injured in the aeroplane crash? No internal injuries, I hope?”

Understanding the implication behind the woman’s line of questioning, Allison replied,

“Um… no. We didn’t get hurt in the crash. We walked a long way afterwards, and we had water and some food. We didn’t throw up, either.”

“I see. So how did this happen?”

Allison averted her gaze.

“He got attacked by a deer.”

The woman was astonished.

“I suppose he must have tried to get close to a fawn.”

"Yes…"

The woman looked at Wil, lying on the bed.

"He should have been more careful."

"A, actually… I was the one who should have been more careful. *I* tried to get near the fawn. Wil was just trying to protect me."

This time, the woman turned to Allison.

"Didn't you know that, in this season, does with their fawns will lash out at anyone who approaches them?"

Allison shook her head sullenly.

"Then I suppose your friend here was hurt because of you."

"Yes." Allison said with a nod.

"So what did you do afterwards?"

"After Wil collapsed, I took out my gun just like before. And…"

"Did you shoot the doe?"

"No. If I killed her, the fawn wouldn't have been able to survive. And then they left."

"I see. That was a wise choice." The woman said, closing the first-aid kit.

"Thank you."

Finishing her word of thanks from earlier, Allison saluted the woman with her right hand.

The woman frowned, her wrinkled eyes glaring at Allison.

"Are you a soldier?"

"Yes. I'm from the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Wil here isn't, though." Allison replied, still saluting the woman.

"I don't like salutes. Nor do I like soldiers or the military."

"I see. But I'm grateful to you all the same. Thank you so much for helping Wil."

"…"

As Allison lowered her hand, the woman replied with a stiff expression.

"If I'd known earlier that you were a solider, and if *you* were the one injured instead of this boy… I wouldn't have helped you."

She then turned to the bed.

“You said this boy’s name was Wil?”

“Yes. His name is Wilhelm Schultz. I’m Allison Whittington.”

The woman smiled.

“Wilhelm and Allison. From your names alone I’d have wagered you were Bezelese.”

But her expression became stern once more.

“My name is Travas Ladia. Don’t feel obligated to memorize it.”

“Oh, no. I’ve already memorized it.”

“Is that so? I’d like to talk to you about something. Let’s leave your friend here and talk outside.”

Ladia got out of her seat and led Allison into the hall. When Allison looked at Wil, Ladia said plainly,

“He’ll be all right.”

Allison and Ladia sat across from one another at the living room table.

The setting sun lit the room.

As Ladia poured herself a cup of water, Allison quietly waited for her to speak.

“It’s already getting dark today, and no one will be coming. I plan to turn the two of you in to the military police in a nearby village tomorrow. But there are some things I’d like to ask. Tell me the truth, please. What are you two doing in enemy territory? What is your purpose?”

Allison answered honestly.

“We’re here to find someone who was kidnapped. And to find a treasure.”

“…What?”

Ladia was struck dumb for a moment.

Allison explained everything. How they had met the old man the day before, and how he had spoken of an amazing treasure. How he was called away by a suspicious man in a way almost eerily like a kidnapping. How he was taken across the river in the middle of night on a Sou Be-Il aeroplane that had illegally entered Roxche.

She then explained how they had given chase on an aeroplane of their own. How they crossed the border but were somehow found by a Sou Be-Il fighter and forced to crash-land. How they walked on and on in order to leave the buffer zone.

“But those people are the ones who kidnapped the old man. So we’re going to tell the military police about it once they arrest us.” Allison finished.

"Unbelievable…" Ladia said, finally breaking her silence. "The two of you, and the ones who kidnapped that gentleman. A treasure hidden in the buffer zone? It's been a very long time since I last heard that ridiculous story." She said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" Allison asked earnestly.

"Let me tell you exactly what kind of foolishness you've just gotten yourselves into."

Ladia paused for a moment, and continued.

"The area around the confluence of the Lutoni River—where the river splits along the Central Mountain Range—was used by General Kuwashia during the Great War as a foothold as he marched into your nation. Did you know this?"

"Yes. The old man told us."

"That's where Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan launched his brutal poison gas attack. Afterwards, rumors started spreading about ingots of gold that were supposedly in the general's custody at the time. They say the ingots were lost in the confusion of the battle, and still remain somewhere on the battlefield. But that is a lie."

"Then…" Allison leaned forward. Ladia nodded.

"Yes. This story about a treasure on the Lutoni is a baseless rumor that's been flying around the area for over thirty years. Anyone who's lived here knows about it. Some people believed in the rumors and set out to find the ingots, but no one found a thing. Even the army denied the rumors, saying that none of their units transport gold anymore. We all forgot the rumors afterwards, but they came round again when the buffer zone was created after the Green Island War. Some people tried to find the treasure before the area was cut off, but they only ended up laughingstocks."

"…"

Ladia continued, driving in the final nail in the coffin.

"So telling the military police about this treasure of yours won't do you any good. I have no idea how this gentleman you told me about knows the rumors—maybe he was caught as a prisoner during the war. Those Bezelese people who kidnapped him from across the border must have fooled by his ridiculous story. And…"

"…"

"The two of you are the same. People like you commit crimes for such worthless reasons, and always end up empty-handed. And you even hurt people along the way. Without even considering just how dangerous it can be."

"…"

Allison bit her lip, looking at Ladia.

"From what you're telling me, you dragged your friend along with you. You said he's only a high school student. You're a soldier; whatever happens to you won't matter as much as

what happens to your friend. What would you tell his parents if something were to happen to him?”

“Wil’s parents…? I… I don’t know… I can’t even imagine…” Allison said sullenly. A look of irritation passed over Ladia’s face.

With a quiet sigh, Ladia picked up her cup and stood from her seat. She poured water into it, and returned with a second cup of water.

“Here.” She said, putting the second cup in front of Allison.

“Thank you.”

With a word of appreciation, Allison happily took several gulps of water.

The moment she put her cup down on the table,

“I hate you people. I despise you.” Ladia said quietly. “You and that boy are both very fluent in Bezelese. You spoke without even a hint of another dialect, and your pronunciation was perfect. Speaking with you felt like I was conversing with my countrymen back in the capital. So it feels quite strange to say this.”

Allison quietly waited for her to continue.

“I lost my family in battle. My father and my husband were both killed during the Great War, and my children won’t return from Green Island. They were all killed by your countrymen. That’s why I despise the East and its people. I loathe you all.”

“I can’t say I don’t understand.”

“Of course. I know there’s no point in telling you things like this.”

“Maybe.”

“But I wanted to get it off my chest. To say to someone from the East how I felt. I feel a little refreshed.”

“Let me tell you something interesting.”

“Yes?”

“That treasure we’re looking for. According to the old man, it’s something so valuable that it could end the conflict between Roxche and Sou Be-Il.”

Ladia’s eyes widened for a moment. She laughed.

“That *is* quite an interesting claim. Do you really believe something like that could exist?”

“No.” Allison replied, shaking her head.

* * *

The sun slowly began to set.

Wil opened his eyes in the room lit by the glow of dusk. He turned to the two people beside him to apologize for causing worry and express his gratitude for the treatment, respectively.

One apologized in return, saying, “Don’t worry about it. I was being rash. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault”, leaning in close to his face.

The other quietly asked him how he was doing, and said that he should get some rest tonight before she took them down to the village tomorrow. She also said that she would bring up some light refreshments for him later.

One person asked if there was anything she could do. Wil asked where the bathroom was. The other person replied that it was outside. The first person said,

“Do you want me to go with you?”

Wil declined and slowly got up out of the bed.

“It’s okay.”

And with a light shake of the head, he stepped into the hallway and carefully walked in the direction he was pointed to.

“Thank goodness…” One person said. She saluted to the other. “Thank you so much.”

“I lent this bed to your friend. You can sleep outside.” Said the other person. The first person answered with a laugh,

“Of course.”

It was night. The world was pitch-black, not yet illuminated by the moon.

A lamp hanging by the window let off a dim glow as Wil, who was in his undershirt, lay in bed.

“I see… so that’s what it must have been…” Wil said, looking up at the ceiling. Allison, sitting in the chair beside the bed, nodded. Her long blond hair shook under the light.

“It was just a rumor, huh. The old man really must have gone senile and ended up believing them.”

“I’m so sorry, Wil.”

“What for?”

Wil looked at Allison. Allison was quietly looking at Wil.

“For believing in that stupid story and dragging you all the way to Sou Be-Il. I thought everything would be okay, but I messed up and got you hurt. Things could have ended really badly. I don’t know what’s going to happen to us now, and I don’t know when we’re going to get to go home to Roxche. I’m sorry.”

"…I don't believe it…" Wil said, sitting up.

"Huh?"

"I'm surprised, Allison… You dragged me into something… and *apologized afterwards*. It's incredible…"

"It's okay once in a while, right?" Allison said with a grin. "I'm really sorry. Wil. I'll try to listen to you a bit more from now on."

"It's all right. And you know, there's something I'm really thankful to you for, Allison. I've always had this dream… and you've fulfilled it just like that."

"…? What kind of dream?" Allison said, after a moment of thought.

"I've always wanted to see the West." Wil said, smiling.

"…What?"

"We Roxcheans always call Sou Be-Il an enemy, and an 'Evil Empire', but I wanted to see it with my own two eyes. It must have been because of Grandma. I've dreamed about it for so long, ever since I was little, but I never told anyone because I thought it was impossible. After I moved to Raputoa to study, I was so close to the border that I started feeling a little more hopeful about my dream. And now, you made my dream come true, if only for a little while. It's all thanks to you, Allison. Thank you."

"Wil…"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really surprised. And I'm a little amazed. But you know…"

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to thank me. And… You're welcome."

Wil lay on the bed again and yawned loudly.

"Are you feeling sleepy?"

"Yeah. And my head doesn't hurt at all anymore. I guess the medicine's working."

"That's a relief. I'll see you tomorrow, then. I'm going to get some sleep now. Two all-nighters in a row is pretty tough." Allison said, pulling Wil's blanket over him. She then took her jacket and the lamp and stood from her seat. Wil was surprised.

"Wait, Allison! Where are you going to sleep? Don't tell me you have to stay outside…"

"That's what the lady told me to do. She says she lent this bed to *you*, not me."

"…"

"I'm really thankful to her. She helped you, and even gave us food and medicine. So I'm going to do what she says. This time, I'll get in trouble alone for what I did. It's okay—it's still summertime, you know."

"But…"

Wil sat up, bewildered, and moved over to the left side of the rather small bed.

"I'll give you half."

"But…"

"It's okay. She said I'm free to use this bed tonight, so I'm free to use it however I want."

Allison returned Wil's determined look with a bemused expression. And she added, embarrassed,

"I have really bad sleeping habits, you know."

Wil nodded with a strange expression.

"Yeah. I know too well."

"I might end up kicking you."

"Uh… As long as you don't kick my head."

"…"

Allison put her jacket on the back of the chair and placed the lamp on the seat. She then blew on the flame to extinguish it. In the darkness, Allison giddily took a seat on the bed.

"There."

She laid down on it and pulled the blanket over herself and Wil.

"Sorry, Wil. I prefer this to sleeping outside." She said, looking to her right. "Sure," Wil answered quietly.

With the faint smell of disinfectant in the air, Allison looked at Wil's face next to her in the pitch-black darkness. She was listening to his quiet breathing.

"Wil."

She said his name, but received no answer. All she heard was the sound of his steady breathing.

"Dreams, huh? I guess mine's come true, too." Allison mumbled, and closed her eyes. She fell asleep in bed next to Wil.

* * *

It was past midnight. The moon rose into the air.

The plains and the forests were lit by pale light. Even in the house standing lonely on the plains, moonlight shone and cast the area in a bright glow. Ladia, lying in her own bed, opened her eyes. The bookshelves that took up one entire wall were filled with thick books. Other than that, the room was sparsely furnished—only a desk and a dresser were there.

Ladia tried to shut her eyes again in the bright light, but changed her mind and rose from bed.

"…"

Putting on a light cardigan over her nightgown, she put on her slippers and walked out into the hall. It was so bright that she did not need to use a lamp.

Ladia slowly passed by Wil's room and entered the living room. There was no one there.

She poured herself a cup of water, drank it, and opened the door outside. There were fields, forests, and plains, all illuminated by the light of the moon. There were no people in sight.

She even looked at the walls next to the doorway. But there was no one there. Ladia slowly shut the door.

She then walked back down the hall to her room.

"Oh?"

She heard the sound of a sneeze. Ladia stopped. She opened the hallway window and looked outside and by the walls, but there was no one there. At the same time, she heard another sneeze. It was coming from within the room. Ladia opened the door a crack and peeked inside.

"…"

She was at a loss for words.

Wil was curled up on the bed, shivering in his sleep. Next to him was Allison, wrapped up in the blanket she had mercilessly pulled away and lying at an odd angle with her blond hair splayed in all directions.

Before she knew it, a smile was creeping up on Ladia's face. She slowly opened the door and went inside.

Kneeling beside the bed, she pulled the blanket away from Allison without pity. Allison resisted in her sleep, but Ladia fought her off and covered Wil with more than half of the blanket. His shivering stopped, and he stretched out his body.

As for Allison, she reacted almost as though on reflex, squirming over and sticking right next to Wil. She curled up and crawled under the blanket.

"Honestly…"

Ladia pushed back several strands of blond hair that had fallen into Allison's face. She then re-adjusted the blanket over them.

“Thank you, Grandma Mut.” Wil muttered suddenly. Ladia was stunned. He was talking in his sleep.

“Thank you, Grandma Mut. Good night.” Allison said from next to Wil. It was as though she was responding to him. Both were speaking standard Bezelese.

Then, they fell into quiet sleep as though nothing had happened.

“It can’t be…”

Ladia looked down at Allison and Wil, sleep completely chased from her.

Chapter 4: Breakfast, then Sortie

Morning arrived. Songbirds' calls began to ring across the woods and the plains.

The moon, no match for the sunlight, was pale in the western sky.

Wil woke with a shiver.

He looked up at the ceiling, and for a moment wondered where he was. But the moment he took in the room, with light filtering inside, he remembered everything.

He was lying on the rightmost edge of the bed. When he sat up, he saw a blond girl on the left side. She was still asleep, hogging most of the blanket for herself.

"…"

Wil briefly thought back to the previous night, wondering which side of the bed he had given her, but decided that there was no point continuing along this line of thought. He got up.

Noting that he was not dizzy from the sudden movement, Wil put on his shirt and jacket. He then put on his shoes and stepped out into the hall. With quiet footsteps he walked out the back door, washed his face and hands at the well, and returned to the living room.

"Good morning." Ladia said. She was sitting at the table, upon which were several books and her glasses.

"Good morning, Ms. Travas."

"Is your forehead a bit better now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Here, take a seat. I'll change your bandages for you."

Wil did as he was told. Ladia unwrapped his bandages, stripped off the gauze, and switched it out for a smaller piece. She then wrapped a thinner layer of bandages around his head.

Afterwards, Ladia washed her hands and handed Wil a cup of water. He thanked her and drank it. Watching him, Ladia gathered up her books and set them aside by the stove. The books were titled, [Timeline of Recent Events], editions from the year 3253 to 3259.

"May I ask you something? Don't force yourself to answer if this makes you uncomfortable." Ladia said solemnly, sitting across from Wil.

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath.

"Did you… the two of you… grow up in the Future House?"

Wil was taken aback. He thought for a moment, and replied sheepishly.

“Heh. I still talk about it in my sleep sometimes. My roommate won’t stop teasing me about it, asking me if I love my grandmother than much.”

“How clever. I suppose your friend Allison never brings up the subject herself.”

“No. She says she wants to hit people who give her pity for having been raised in the Future House. I’ve had to stop her personally a few times.”

“I see…”

There was a shadow cast over Ladia’s eyes.

“I suppose you know Grandma, then?” Wil asked. Ladia nodded slowly.

“I’ve never met her myself, but every Bezelese person of my generation knows of her. Madame Corazòn Mut.”

“I see…”

“Madame Corazòn…” Ladia trailed off, as Wil listened eagerly, “She was respected by the people of Sou Be-Il. That is, until she defected to Roxche after the Great War.”

Wil quietly waited for Ladia to continue.

“Do you know what we called her afterwards, here in Sou Be-Il?”

“No, but I can guess.”

“Your guess would probably be correct. We called her a traitor, but with a much harsher word. To think that a dignified and noble aristocrat responsible for so many charitable works would defect Cross-River and set up a home for war orphans… No one could have seen such a thing coming. We naturally knew that she must have had her reasons, but we were all furious at her betrayal. It was big news at the time. People criticized her, saying, ‘What use is a Future House set up for the enemy?’, or ‘Is she planning to raise soldiers who will grow up to murder out countrymen?’. Some newspapers went even further.”

Wil, whose gaze had been fixed on the books by the stove—

“And I was no exception.”

—turned back to Ladia.

“I also agreed with them. After all, she was my total opposite.”

Wil finally spoke.

“Grandma Mut always used to say to us, ‘I’m doing my best with the future I’ve thought of and discovered for myself. No matter what anyone might say, it’s an admirable thing to walk down your own path’. And she also said something else. ‘Even if it means denying your own path ahead, you shouldn’t deem that someone else’s path is wrong’.”

“I see.” Ladia said quietly, her gaze drifting downward. “If… if it’s all right, then tell me. I’d like to know. Your parents… when did they pass away? That girl’s, too…”

Wil was surprised at Ladia's question, but he answered her with neither hurt feelings nor enthusiasm.

"We're both seventeen years old right now. Allison came to the Future House when she was eight."

"The Green Island Conflict…"

"Yes, I think so."

"What about her mother?"

"I've been told that she always lived alone with her father, who was a career soldier."

"I see…"

"I still remember it like it was yesterday. The day Allison first came to the Future House."

In contrast to Ladia's grim expression, Wil spoke cheerfully.

"Kids from many different countries come to the Future House. They're all war orphans with no one to take care of them. At first, everyone is so scared and sad that they end up bursting into tears when they have to introduce themselves to the others. Then we'd try to console them, saying that we're all friends. But Allison was different. She stepped in front of everyone, her hair fluttering. And as soon as she introduced herself, she pointed at me, who was standing nearby, and said, 'All right! From today on, you're going to be my underling!'." Wil said with a chuckle.

"…"

"Everyone was shocked. Me, Grandma, and the other kids. One of the matrons scolded her, saying 'isn't "underling" a bit too harsh?'. That's when Allison said, 'Then you can be my faithful subordinate. I'll be a colonel, and you'll be a major'."

"I can already imagine. She must have been quite the rambunctious child." Ladia said, listening intently.

"Yes. Both at home and at school, she was braver and cooler than anyone. She really liked me for some reason, so we always stuck together. She dragged me into a lot of things. Although I guess things aren't much different now."

"What about yourself? When did you come into Madame Corazòn's care?" Ladia asked once Wil finished with Allison's story. Wil answered with surprising ease.

"When I was three years old. Of course, I don't remember it."

"I see."

"Oh, but I'm not a war orphan."

Ladia, in the midst of her sympathetic nods, looked up in shock.

"What do you mean?"

Wil continued as plainly as before.

“I was told that my parents left me on the doorstep.”

“…What…?” Ladia gasped.

“I was told that I was left on the doorstep when I was about three years old. The milkman found me there one morning and brought me inside. I was specially accepted into the Future House. Grandma and the matrons told me that, at the time, I couldn’t speak a word. No matter what they said to me, all I did was stare back. I was late to develop. That’s probably why my parents abandoned me.”

“…”

“But afterwards, I learned to speak from the other kids, Grandma, and the matrons. At least, as far as I can remember, I’ve never had any trouble with speaking.”

“Does your friend know all this?”

Wil nodded calmly.

“Yes. Everyone in the Future House knows. When Allison first heard, she got so angry that she stood on a desk and led the other kids in some a rousing speech, saying that if my parents ever changed their minds came back for me, they would drive them out by force. Thankfully, she never carried out the plan.”

Watching Wil fondly reminisce about his past, Ladia remembered the previous day.

She took a deep breath and asked,

“What about your name?”

“They didn’t know my original name, so Grandma made a new one for me. My given name and surname both belonged to her grandfather. I love my name very much. She said that I could change it if I wanted to, but I don’t intend to do so.”

“I understand now. That’s why you’re both fluent in Bezelese. You must have learned it from her.”

“Yes. Oh, but Allison’s different. She knew Bezelese even before coming to the Future House. Until we find work or go on to school, everyone in the Future House speaks Bezelese. Grandma and the matrons taught us, and we even had Bezelese-only days sometimes. But Grandma was floored when she heard how fluent Allison was. She said that her father was very good at Bezelese, and that they spoke in both languages at home. Although I don’t really know why that was the case.”

“I see… Tell me one more thing.” Ladia said. “Is Madame Corazòn… still well?”

Wil smiled.

“She left on a journey half a year ago. I’m sure she’s doing well where she is.”

“I understand… Thank you for telling me all this. I’m so glad we had a chance to talk.”

"No problem."

"Now," Ladia said, getting to her feet and putting on the apron that was beside her. "Let's have breakfast. Do you like Western-style cooking?"

"Yes. Grandma Mut cooked for us often."

"We'll have some bacon. How do you prefer your potatoes? Sliced and stir-fried, or roasted whole?"

"I prefer roasted, and Allison prefers stir-fried."

"I see… Then I'll make the stir-fry today. I'm sorry about that."

Wil shook his head. "Not at all. I'm sure Allison will be happy. I'll help." He got up from his seat.

"Then could you start the fire? There's some chopped firewood outside."

"Of course."

"Is your friend still asleep?"

"Yes. Allison's not a morning person. But I'm sure she'll be up in time for breakfast."

Ladia chuckled wryly.

"I'll get the firewood." Wil said, heading outside. Suddenly, Ladia called out,

"The gloves are next to the firewood shed, Levin."

"All right."

After Wil went outside, Ladia opened the cupboard and reached for the potatoes. It was only then that she realized what she had said.

"…!"

Shutting her eyes, she looked up at the ceiling.

When preparations for breakfast were just about finished, Allison opened her eyes automatically.

"…Must be this way."

Cracking her eyelids open in the bright morning light, Allison unconsciously tied her hair, took her jacket, put on her shoes, and followed her nose at a stagger.

"See?"

"You were right."

Said Wil and a smiling Ladia, as soon as Allison arrived at the living room.

“Good morning, Allison. Did you sleep well? You should wash up so we can eat breakfast.”

“Here you go, Miss Sleepyhead.” Ladia handed her a towel and made a gesture to take her jacket. Allison gave it to her, and Ladia hung it on the back of a chair.

“This is your seat. Your potatoes are ready.”

Set on the table were Allison’s favorite foods, still steaming hot.

“Where am I?” Allison wondered, still half-asleep.

“Don’t be shy. Dig in.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

Allison almost literally dug into the food she loved. And after eating, she said honestly that it was very delicious.

Wil and Ladia ate more slowly as they talked about Wil’s school. She seemed to be shocked that Wil was receiving a scholarship from the Republic of Raputoa. Allison chimed in, praising Wil’s intellect. She also complained that he received a set sum every year, and that if not for this outdated system that prevented Wil from extending or cutting short his academic career, he could have skipped several grades by now.

After the meal, Ladia served three cups of tea and began to discuss their next course of action.

“Both of you, listen carefully.”

She explained that a truck that delivered her groceries once every few days was scheduled to arrive before afternoon today. That Allison and Wil should get a lift to the village nearby, about twenty kilometers away. That they should go to the police and request official protection. That they should mention nothing about the Sou Be-Il kidnapping plot or the fighter plane, and that they should claim to have crash-landed in the middle of an ordinary sightseeing flight.

“Things will only become complicated if I go with you. I’ll tell the deliveryman that I found you just now by the house, so do play along as best you can.”

Wil nodded.

“We understand. We won’t bring you any trouble. We’ll also say that we treated my injury ourselves.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t really understand, but I’ll just do whatever Wil wants.” Allison said, sipping her tea. Then she added, “for a few days, anyway.”

“Maybe I should have washed your shirt for you…”

“It’s all right, Ms. Travas.” Wil said, shaking his head. His shirt collar and front were dyed with blood, like patterns had been drawn on it.

“And your jacket, too. Do we have time for me to mend it, I wonder?” Ladia asked, glancing at the jacket hanging from the back of Allison’s chair.

“Hm?”

Allison got up and examined it.

“Oh no!”

She picked it up, dismayed. There was a rather large tear along the shoulder and collar.

“I had no idea… How embarrassing.” She sighed, putting her fingers through the tear. The badge of rank on the left side of her collar was flipped over, dangling by a thread. The moment Allison stroked the badge, there was a clatter as something fell to the floor.

It was a small, thin, rectangular piece of metal, about the size of an eraser.

“You dropped something.” Wil said, picking up the object. “What is this thing?” He wondered, placing it on the table.

It was a thin piece of metal with a dull shine. The edges had been filed into curves, and engraved on one side was a bird with long tail feathers. The other side was flat and blank.

“Oh, wait…” Allison said, troubled. “That’s… technically supposed to be a military secret.”

“What?” Wil said in surprise, gently putting the object down.

“I’ll just tell you, so don’t tell anyone else. Promise?”

“You don’t have to go that far…”

“No, since you’ve already seen it, I’ll tell you. I’d feel bad about hiding things from you, and it’s actually a pretty interesting story.”

“But…”

“I won’t tell a soul. In fact, I never even saw such a thing.” Ladia said to Wil, reassuring him.

“Then here goes. This piece of metal is used to prove your identity on the battlefield.” Allison said, picking up the object.

“Really? How?” Wil wondered, curious.

“The animal on this side of the tag is a way to tell if you’re actually Roxchean or an enemy in disguise—uh, sorry about that.” Allison said, turning to Ladia.

“Don’t worry.”

Wil returned his gaze from Ladia to Allison.

"Yeah. So these tags get sewn into soldiers' badges of rank before every mission, and not even the people who wear them know what the animals are. They take them out only when they come back and get back into contact with allied forces. An officer from the military police then compares the soldier to the list of animals they have, and makes sure it's the right person. It helps us discover enemy spies since no one could possibly prepare these tags in advance, especially since they get switched around every mission. I heard they started using this measure near the end of the Great War with the army and navy special forces, since they had a lot to do with covert operations."

"Huh. That's really interesting."

"And ever since aeroplanes were invented, pilots began to use them too. In case we parachute out of an aeroplane and come back to base, I mean. Each unit changes tags twice a year or so. Actually, I'm not supposed to know what's on my tag. But I didn't really have a choice this time." Allison said, her gaze fixed on her tag. "No one knows what kind of animal, and how many of them, are on the tags. And since there haven't been any battles recently, not many people get to see them. This is actually the first time I saw a tag with my own eyes. This bird must be… a cuckoo? Yes?"

Allison showed Ladia the tag.

"Yes, it is. It's quite well-engraved."

"There's rumors saying that the military commissions a famous metalworking company to make these tags. I wish they wouldn't waste their budget on stupid things like this-"

As Allison muttered, shaking her head, she noticed Wil.

"Wil…? You're making a scary face."

There was a grim expression on Wil's face. His eyes were narrowed, and he was glaring at the empty table.

Even Ladia was surprised by his expression. Her eyes met Allison's astonished gaze.

As Wil remained silent, Allison tried to talk to him.

"What's wrong? Does your stomach hurt or something?"

Wil lightly shook his head. He then slowly turned his gaze towards Allison.

"Allison."

"What is it?"

He enunciated clearly, intent on confirming his suspicions.

"During the Great War, did ordinary foot soldiers know about their tags? *Could* they know?"

"No. I told you, only the-"

"Only the special forces, right? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Probably." Allison nodded. She was about to ask why Wil was asking this question, but he started first.

"Cuckoos are brood parasites."

"What's that?"

"It means they don't make nests of their own; they lay their eggs in other birds' nests, and make the other birds raise their offspring."

"Oh, right. So… uh… and?"

Allison was mystified. Wil answered her question.

"'Ah, the bird that knows not its parent soars without limit'. That's what the old man said when he realized you were a solider. He picked up your jacket and felt the collar, remember? Back then, I wondered what he could have been talking about. But now I finally understand. This was it. He figured out the animal on the tag just by touching it. He knew that it was a cuckoo, a bird that lays its eggs in other birds' nests. That's why he said what he said."

"…"

Laughter drained from Allison's face.

"The old man really *was* part of the special forces in the Great War. And he's completely sane, even now. Allison, I want to meet that man. I want to see him and ask him where the treasure is. I want to go there and see for myself."

Allison's expression was the same as the one she had worn during the fire at the dormitory.

"All right. I get *exactly* what you're talking about. So, in conclusion?"

Wil nodded.

"Let's rescue the old man, no matter what it takes."

"W, wait a second, you two!" Ladia cried in shock, but Wil cut her off.

"We're very sorry, Ms. Travas. But we'd like to meet the old man again and speak to him. We want to know what this treasure he spoke of really is. Maybe he really was talking about the old rumors from this area. But I keep getting the feeling that that isn't the case. I'd like to confirm my suspicions."

"And like I said before, I'm going to do whatever Wil wants!"

"…"

Ladia was lost for words. Allison and Wil quickly started on forming a plan.

"So what do we do, Wil? I guess handing ourselves in to the police is gonna have to wait."

"Probably. If only we knew where the old man was taken…"

"I guess busting in there ourselves is out of the question. How about we leak the kidnapping incident to the media?"

"If we do that, they might kill him to eliminate the evidence."

"That's no good. …If we knew where he was, we could just go check out the place. I wish we could talk to him just for a bit. We could find the treasure first and then leak the news afterwards."

"Figure out his location and sneak in to talk to him, huh. That's going to be tough. Sneaking home after curfew is nothing compared to this."

"True. But I'm sure we'll find a way."

"…I can see how the two of you ended up crossing the border now." Ladia said quietly, as she blankly watched Allison and Wil. "But you'd best give up. If something should happen and you end up worse than just injuries… if you were to lose your lives, people are going to mourn for you."

"…We know. But," Wil said, "if the treasure the old man talked about really is somewhere… a treasure that could end the war between Roxche and Sou Be-Il…"

"Do you really believe something like that could exist?" Ladia repeated her question from the previous day.

"No…" Wil replied, shaking his head. "I don't think so. But when I first heard the story from the old man, I thought, 'I *wish* something like that existed'. And now, I'd like to find it."

"…"

Ladia closed her eyes, shaking her head. She sighed.

"I suppose there's no stopping you two. But you haven't come up with a clear plan, have you? You don't know where he is, or how you should meet him."

"No. But we'll find a way."

"Agreed."

Ladia sighed again and turned her gaze to the ceiling. She then turned back to Allison and Wil, placing her elbows on the table and her chin on her clasped hands.

"Listen carefully. About thirty kilometers north of here is the Teruto Royal Army Base. The man you're looking for must be being held there."

"What…?"

"Are… are you sure?"

Wil and Allison gaped.

"Yes. That's the nearest military base from here. It's in the direction the aeroplane flew away in."

"Then…"

"Now we know where we're headed." Allison said with a grin "And you knew everything from the start."

"Of course." Ladia said, not sounding the least bit apologetic.

"That aside, an army base, huh?" Wil thought out loud. Allison quickly realized what he was implying, and said,

"Right. There's no way we could get in there easily."

"Actually, there is." Ladia said with a cheerful smile. "You two, please don't look at me like that. I suppose there really must be something wrong with me."

* * *

"This is…"

"A uniform?"

Said Allison and Wil.

On the desk was a set of clothes. Vivid blue pants and a light jacket of the same color embroidered with gold threads. A silk shirt and a red tie. A thick leather belt and short, shiny black boots.

The vibrant blue beret was intricately embroidered with the picture of a dagger. A golden blade curving outwards at a gentle arc, with a red hilt. It was the crest of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, known as the Curved Dagger. Like the Spear of Seron in Roxche, it had been the symbol of the West from time immemorial. In the past, it was engraved onto the shields and armor of knights. Today, the crest could be found on military uniforms and weapons.

"This is the uniform of the Youth Corps of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Bezel."

"The Royal Guard… That's incredible." Wil said, tense.

"It… is?" Allison wondered. Wil nodded.

"The Royal Guard is a group that exists to protect the Bezelese Royal Family. It's a group composed of the most elite soldiers in the force, and only people from high-ranking noble families are allowed to join. The Youth Corps is where younger people who fit the requirements are assigned to receive special education."

"That's correct. You know quite a bit."

"Yeah." Allison added. "I see. So this uniform belongs to the best of the best. If we're wearing these clothes…"

"…You'll be able to enter any military base easily. Especially ones in the countryside. If you ask one of the guides, you'll be shown around anywhere you ask. Even their holding cells."

“That’s great!” Allison said, her eyes fixed on the uniform.

“I have one more set for you.”

“This is wonderful. What beautiful uniforms.” Allison said excitedly.

Wil stepped closer to Ladia and whispered,

“Did this uniform belong to Levin?”

“…!”

Ladia was astonished. She nodded slowly.

“Yes… That’s right. The other uniform belonged to his older brother Tims.”

“…Is it really all right for us to borrow these uniforms?”

And as though to dispel the rigor from Wil’s expression, Ladia smiled.

“Of course. Please, do wear them.”

“Is this about right…?” Wil wondered to himself, stepping into the living room in the blue uniform.

“It’s… well…” Ladia smiled, cringing slightly.

The shirt was crumpled all over, the tie was crooked, and the sleeves were too short. It would be a lie to call him presentable.

“Here, let me fix that.”

Indicating for Wil to hang his jacket on the back of the chair, Ladia flattened out his shirt. She loosened his suspenders slightly and redid his tie.

“There. You look wonderful, Warrant Officer.”

After adjusting Wil’s tie and collar, Ladia gently put a finger under his chin with a practiced touch.

Wil raised his head up straight, slightly surprised. Their eyes met.

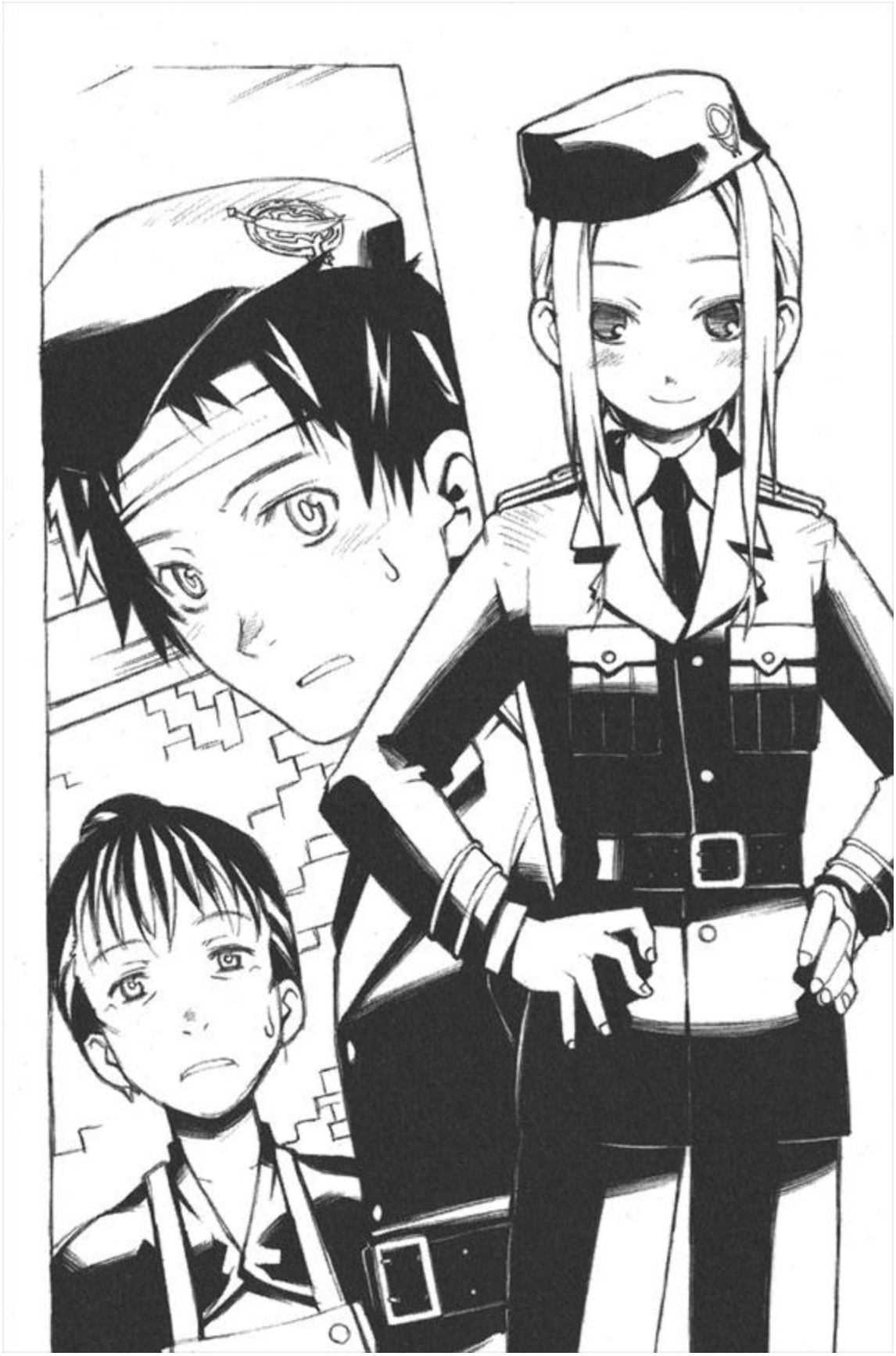
“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Wil looked at Ladia’s darkened expression. He thanked her.

“Thank you. I’m very grateful.”

The shadow left Ladia’s face.

“This should be about right.” Allison said, stepping into the living room in the blue uniform.



"…"

"My goodness…"

Wil was lost for words. Ladia was shocked.

Allison was dressed perfectly. She had the jacket on with a belt clasped neatly around her waist, her uniform without so much as a wrinkle. Her long blond hair was tied back above her neckline and fastened with a hairclip. Atop her head sat the perfectly-angled beret.

"It looks even more convincing on you than a Bezelese person… They say the uniform was made to match those with blond hair, since many residents of Sfrestus are also blond."

"What about you, Wil? Tell me what you think."

"Oh. Um… It looks better on you than anything I've ever seen you wear. I wonder why…?"

"Thanks. I like this uniform, too. I'd almost like to trade it for the boring uniforms *we* have to wear in Roxche."

"That's enough talking about the uniforms. There are some things you should know." Ladia said. "The Royal Guard are the cream of the crop, acknowledged by all. And they're aristocrats. In other words… They behave a little differently from ordinary soldiers. That is to say-"

"They act all high-and-mighty, right?" Allison said without even trying to be tactful.

"Well… yes. That also goes for the Youth Corps. So if you want to avoid suspicion—"

"We have to act that way ourselves." Wil finished.

"Yes. Have you heard of 'The Princess of Greyruse'? It's a fairy tale here in Sou Be-Il."

"It's the story about the selfish princess who wants to own everything and gives everyone trouble, right?" Wil said. Allison also joined in, realizing that she knew the story as well.

"Oh! I remember that one! The selfish princess lives in a kingdom high in the mountains, but she asks for things like dresses, jewels, and even forests, mountains, and lakes. And in the end, she demands to have the clouds and the sun, so she goes up to the sky and asks the sky god to give them to her because she's the princess. Right?"

"Yes. That's the story, I'm glad you know about it already."

"But that fairy tale-" Wil said, but Allison cut him off.

"In the end, the sky god got so sick of the princess's selfishness that he ran away. And so, the kingdom was left without a sky. I don't really get what the moral of the story is supposed to be, but I always liked this fairy tale."

"Allison… Who told you this story? Was it Grandma?"

"No, it was my dad. I heard it from him when I was little. I loved it so much that I still remember it like it was yesterday."

"…"

Wil went silent. Allison blinked.

"Something wrong?"

"No, nothing." Wil said, shaking his head.

Ladia asked if she could continue, and returned to her explanation.

"You must act like the princess and behave differently towards other people—as though you're above them. Don't salute people, even if they're of a higher rank. If they ask you something, laugh and act like they should be grateful that you're visiting the base. I don't have much of a right to say this, but… The nobles of Sfrestus have always been that way."

"We understand. We'll show 'em what stuck-up really looks like."

"I bet you'll do that really well."

"You'll do just fine."

Wil and Ladia answered her at once.

"Take this." Ladia said, bringing a suitcase with a handle on the top. It was made of thick leather and looked very sturdy.

"This looks expensive." Allison noted.

"Carry your clothes in here. If the soldier on security duty asks to search the suitcase—"

"We'll just get angry and blow him off, right?"

"Precisely. Bluff and intimidate them."

As Wil listened to Allison and Ladia's surprisingly well-matched conversation, the latter suddenly said to him,

"Wil, have you ever shot a gun before?"

Wil was a little taken aback at the sudden question, but answered,

"Well, yes. I took a class on it at school."

"How confident of a marksman are you?"

Allison answered proudly,

"Wil here placed sixth in the 3287 Kaashi Shooting Competition, you know. There's no way he'd miss."

"?"

Ladia stared, confused.

"You're not making things really clear for her, Allison…"

"Oh, right. Let me explain. There's a city called Kaashi in the Republic of Raputoa in Roxche. A festival takes place there every year, and Wil got sixth place in their shooting competition. I guess this doesn't say much, but I promise he's a better shot than I am."

"I see. Then that's enough." Ladia said. She reached into a drawer next to the fireplace and took out a large object covered in cloth. Carrying the heavy object with both hands, she place it on the table and gingerly unfolded the cloth. Inside was a leather holster housing a handgun.

With her thin fingers Ladia pulled out the gun with its muted glint. It was an extremely large handgun, about twice as long and thick as the one issued to Allison. It had a narrow wooden grip with a magazine sticking out in front of it. The chassis was rough and the barrel was thin.

"That's one heck of a gun." Allison said.

"Make sure to have this on you. I'll teach you how to use it. You can practice before you go."

Wil slowly shook his head.

"I don't think I could make a snap-decision and shoot someone. Even if I had it, I don't think I'd ever use it."

"If that's what you've decided, it's all right. But please keep it with you."

"…By any chance, did this—" Wil began. Ladia nodded.

"Yes. It originally belonged to my husband. I passed it down to our children, but they both left this gun at home when they left. So I had it prepared to use for myself. But… take it. Please. Think of it as a lucky charm."

"…"

"Please."

"I understand. I'll do as you ask." Wil said. Ladia breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you."

A truck approached from across the plains. Each time it hit a curve in the road it disappeared from sight and appeared again. Soon, neared Ladia's house.

Allison and Wil stood at the front door in full uniform. Next to them was Ladia, wearing an apron. Wil was wearing the large holster at his side. The leather suitcase was at their feet.

"I'm just going to ask one more thing of the two of you." Ladia said. Allison and Wil turned round towards her.

"I'm only lending you those uniforms. So please come back to return them to me. I don't care when. Even if they get worn and you lose the hats, I'd like the two of you to bring them back to me together. Even if you can't find the treasure, come back here laughing that you never found it."

"We understand. You have our word." Wil said. Allison nodded over and over again.

"Yeah. We definitely will. We'll bring them back to you ourselves, even if it means crossing the border illegally again. I have this location memorized, too."

"Thank you. The rest is up to you. This is as much as I can do." Ladia said.

The truck was coming over to them. It was grey and of an older design, and there was a tarp over the bed like a tent.

"Thank you very much, Ms. Travas. I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done for us."

"Me too. I mean, I'm not really good at this stuff, but, uh…"

The sound of the engine drew near. Ladia smiled.

"You don't have to thank me. But… would you give me a salute?"

Allison was shocked. She looked at Wil. Then, she winked and said,

"Thank you!"

On cue, Allison and Wil saluted Ladia.

Raising her hand so her fingertips were barely touching her beret, Allison gracefully demonstrated a textbook salute. Wil followed shortly after, a little awkwardly.

Ladia took hold of either side of her skirt. Sweeping back her right foot, she slowly bent her left knee and gently bowed her head.

"May the gods of war and fate be with you. Good luck."

"We'll be back." Allison and Wil replied.

As afternoon approached, the moon began to hover over the western woods. A thin layer of clouds covered the blue sky.

There was a road that crossed the dense forests like a valley. It was lined on the side by utility poles and several electric lines.

A lone vehicle was driving north along that path. It was an old grey truck with a tarp spread over the bed like a tent.

In the driver's seat on the right side of the truck was a large, middle-aged man. Nest to him sat a boy and a girl in blue uniforms.

"Uh, if I may, uh…" The man stuttered awkwardly.

“What is it?” Asked the blonde girl. The boy’s gaze anxiously wandered left and right.

“Well, I’m just a commoner, but could I ask you something?” The man asked.

“Oh, of course.” The blonde girl—Allison—replied. Having received permission to speak, the man spoke in a more relaxed tone.

“Uh, are you two her relatives?”

“Yes. We came to see her for the first time in a very long time.”

“I see. Family really is great. I’ve been making deliveries for that woman for ten years now, and I’ve never seen her smile like that before.” The man said with a grin.

“Really? I’m glad to hear that.” Allison said with a smile of her own, elbowing Wil in the side.

“Do you know why she’s living all alone in a place like that? I once asked her offhand myself, and, well… Got the shock of my life.”

“Yes.” Said Wil. Allison looked at him, surprised.

With his gaze set forward, Wil slowly answered.

“I once heard that… the next time war breaks out and the enemy comes to attack, she would take up a gun and fight where she lived. That she would fight alone against the despicable enemies who took away her family.”

“That’s the story.” The man nodded solemnly.

“…”

Allison was still staring at Wil. Wil was still looking ahead.

“But that won’t be necessary anymore.”

“That so?” The man wondered.

“Yes. After all, *we’re* the ones who’ll do the fighting from this point on.” Wil said, smiling.

“That’s real brave of you.” The man said cheerfully, driving towards the Teruto Royal Army Base.

Chapter 5: The Roxchean Spy

The Teruto Royal Army Base was in the middle of a dense forest.

Tall coniferous trees stood in the woods, and built within was a castle from the Middle Ages. It was not a very tall structure, but at each corner of the stone fortification was a cylindrical tower used as a lookout point.

The castle was the command center of the Teruto Base, and just south of the castle were several barracks that could house hundreds of soldiers. Lined up beside them were military trucks and even armored vehicles equipped with towed cannons and machine guns.

North of the castle was a gymnasium-shaped hangar made of metal. The hangar roof was painted green, and there were even tree-shaped patterns to help camouflage the structure.

Inside the wide grounds were several paved roads running in straight lines. Between the roads was a field covered in grass and dirt. In the very corner was a shooting range with mounds of earth, used to hold targets in place for practice.

On the wide-open grounds in front of the hangar was a long canal, dug in a straight line. The water had been directed from a small river nearby for the canal, which was a runway for seaplanes. At the end was a ramp used to lower boats into the river.

Inside the castle, in a lavishly decorated room.

There were paintings and suits of armor adorning the walls. In the center of the room was a long table covered with a white tablecloth. Atop it were candlesticks, vases, and plates of steaming hot stew.

A group of middle-aged men were partaking in a meal. All of them were wearing military uniforms. Their pants and jackets were dark brown. They were the Sou Be-Il Royal Army uniforms.

On the chests and shoulders of the uniforms were the emblem of the curved dagger, shining medals and badges, as well as badges of rank that showed off their lofty positions. Behind them were young orderlies serving as messengers. This was the dining room of the high-ranking officers of the Teruto Royal Army Base.

The men were eating in silence. They ate without so much as a word, as though they had nothing else in particular to do.

“I’m finished. If you’ll excuse me.” One officer said, getting up from his seat. He wiped his mouth on a napkin and threw it to the floor without a second thought. He was about fifty years of age with thinning hair. It would be a lie to say that his physique was balanced in any way. On his uniform was a badge of rank showing that he was a colonel.

The rotund colonel snatched his hat from his orderly and left the room, the clacking of his boots echoing down the hall.

About twenty seconds passed after the door closed shut.

“Phew…”

One of the officers sighed. As if of cue, the rigid air in the dining hall loosened.

There was another officer there with a colonel's badge of rank. He was a man with a mustache. A major in his thirties, sitting across from the colonel, said,

"How long are those bastards planning to bum around on our base?"

"Watch what you're saying, Major." Said Colonel Elcub, the commander of the Teruto Royal Army Base. And before the major could apologize, he added, "can't you see I'm doing my best to *not* punch him in the jaw?"

A roar of laughter filled the dining room. As the air lightened, the officers began to break out into conversation.

"What are the people who accompanied Colonel Nott doing now?" Asked a lieutenant colonel. The major from earlier answered.

"The same as always, sir. Lazing about by the aeroplanes. Who knows what they're thinking? They act like we're not even allowed to talk to them. Although they still do eat in the mess hall."

"'Aeroplane testing unit' my ass. More like a group of thugs." Said another lieutenant colonel. The other officers burst into laughter in agreement.

"What of the old man they brought in?" Asked Colonel Elcub. The major replied,

"Still locked up in the basement, sir. We have an orderly keeping watch, but we have no idea what Colonel Nott and his men are doing down there."

"I see."

At the colonel's orders, the orderly who took away the finished plates returned with tea.

The major stood from his seat.

"I just don't understand, Commander. Is the old man really a Roxchean spy, like Colonel Nott says? How likely is it that they'd happen across an old man crossing the river in the middle of testing the new planes? And even if the man is a spy, why are they interrogating him themselves, instead of handing him to the military police? There's something-"

Colonel Elcub waved the major back into his seat.

"There's something fishy about all this, no doubt. But a stink alone isn't enough grounds to make accusations." He said, "Major. I want you to keep a close eye on them. I'm counting on you."

The major replied with an enthusiastic salute.

Just when the colonel had taken his first sip of tea, there was a knock. The solider next to the door opened it, and a young female soldier stepped inside with a salute.

"Apologies for intruding during your meal, sir!"

She handed Colonel Elcub a small note.

The colonel read the message. With a note of acknowledgement, he handed the paper to the lieutenant colonel sitting next to him.

"Two young warrant officers from the Royal Guard Youth Corps are asking for permission to tour the base."

Hushed murmurs rose up in the dining room. The lieutenant colonel continued.

"We're really getting all sorts out here in the countryside. And from the Royal Guard, of all places…"

"We can't turn them down, then. Of course, they probably already knew that when they asked for permission. I'm putting you in charge of this, Reig. Make sure you treat them with respect. You know how difficult they can be."

"Yes, sir. Aren't you going to meet them, sir?" Asked the balding lieutenant colonel.

"I hate aristocrats. Don't even want 'em to remember my name or my face."

"Apologies, sir."

Reig stood, wiping his mouth.

"Take care to be respectful. And I hope I don't need to remind you, but—"

Lieutenant Colonel Reig nodded.

"Yes, sir. I'll make sure they don't run into Colonel Nott and his men."

"Excellent."

Checking to make sure that his hat was on correctly, Lieutenant Colonel Reig took a small car towards the front gates of the Teruto Base.

On either side of the gate, which sat on a one-lane road, was a guard station. In front of one of the stations were two people dressed in vivid blue uniforms, both in their late teens. They sat with their legs crossed on chairs that the men on guard duty must have brought for them.

The lieutenant colonel stepped out of the car and approached the visitors. One was a girl with long blond hair. The other was a boy whose head was wrapped in bandages. On his belt was a large, holstered handgun. It was an expensive weapon (worth about two months of an average soldier's pay) that was not issued by the military.

The visitors slowly stood. The lieutenant colonel saluted them.

"Welcome to the Teruto Royal Army Base. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Reig, here on Colonel Elcub's orders to show you around."

The visitors saluted him.

“It’s nice to meet you. Do we have to tell you our names, too?” The girl asked brusquely. The boy watched the conversation with a detached look.

“Not at all, Warrant Officers.” Said Lieutenant Colonel Reig, forcing a smile.

“Is that so? We’re just here for a short visit. We have no intention of getting in the way of you *little* people. We’ll have a quick look around and leave. Would that be too much of a bother?”

“Not at all, Warrant Officer. Please. Take your time. Have you eaten lunch yet?”

“We don’t need any food, thank you.”

“I see. Then please let me escort you around the base. If you’d like to come to the car-”

“No thank you.”

“Pardon?”

“We don’t need a *lieutenant colonel* to show us around the base. We have no intention of going around with a high-ranking officer while we’re here in the countryside. …You there.”

The girl’s gaze was fixed on a guard with a rifle slung over his shoulder, standing stiff. He was a young man wearing a green combat uniform and a helmet, probably not yet twenty. He was still at the lowest rank of private.

“M, me, Warrant Officer?” He croaked.

“Yes, you. Could you show us around the base?”

“…Uh… umm…”

Half in tears, the private looked to the lieutenant colonel for help.

“Hm. Your name, Private?”

“R, René Falkrott, sir!”

The lieutenant colonel’s response was pitiless.

“Hm. Private René. You are hereby relieved from guard duty. I order you to show the Royal Guard warrant officers around the base. Understand?”

“A, ahh…”

“Your answer, Private.”

“Y, y, y, yes, sir! Private René, reporting for duty, sir!”

“Excellent. Watch your manners around our guests. Also…”

The lieutenant colonel went up to René and whispered something into his ear.

“That is all. You have permission to use the car.”

"No thanks. We'll walk. Let's go." The girl said. Ignoring the lieutenant colonel, she began to walk away with her companion.

"Th, th, this way, please… F, follow me…" Said René. One of the guards called him back, reminding him to leave his rifle and helmet. René took them off and handed them to his friend, panicked, and put on the hat he had hung on his shoulder.

"P, p, p, p, p, please excuse me I'm on my way!"

He hurried after the visitors.

Watching the three soldiers depart, one of the guards remarked,

"Whew… Glad it's not me out there. I hate aristocrats."

"Me too." Said the lieutenant colonel. Everyone stared.

Allison, Wil, and Private René walked down the road to the base.

Walking next to Wil, a little behind René, Allison whispered in Bezelese.

"It's going well so far. We even got ourselves a nervous guide."

"…You know… I think my heart's just about to stop right now."

"Get a hold of yourself. You just have to walk around in uniform like it's the most normal thing in the world. That's what every military base is like."

"…"

"Don't worry, Wil. Since you're not used to stuff like this, you can just stay quiet like we agreed earlier. And besides, you said we'd rescue the old man no matter what, right?"

Wil nodded.

"Yeah… The problem is the location. They probably have him locked up in that castle they're using as the command center. They usually have prison facilities in the basements."

"Great. First we'll ask for a tour of the castle. Then we'll head for the dungeons. And after that, the hangar."

"The hangar?"

"Don't tell me you forgot already. If they have aeroplanes there…"

"…You're going to steal one?"

"I'm going to *borrow* one."

"…"

Unable to stand Allison and Wil's hushed whispers, René looked back as he continued to walk.

"Uh, umm… If there's a problem with me…"

Allison softened her expression slightly.

"No, we weren't talking about you. We were just complaining about the bigwigs."

"I see… My apologies, Warrant Officer."

"Don't worry too much. I picked you out because it's easier to talk to someone our age."

"Th, thank you."

Feeling more at ease, René began to point out the structures around them.

"Uh, to our left, you'll see the barracks. And over there is the depot where we store the weapons and vehicles. The castle over here is the command center, and over there is the hangar. We usually have liaison crafts on standby there."

"I see. Actually, there's something I wanted to ask you, Private."

"Yes, ma'am?" René asked enthusiastically.

"What did that lieutenant colonel whisper to you back there?"

"…"

His face stiffened.

"Uh… um…"

After a moment's hesitation, René realized that he had no choice but to tell the truth.

"Actually… people from another unit flew in a few days ago…"

"Oh? From where?" Allison asked.

"I'm not sure, ma'am. Not from any base nearby, as far as I can tell."

"Is that all?"

"Well… The lieutenant colonel instructed me that I should not let you run into any of them during the tour."

"Oh? I wonder why. Do we really look so ferocious?" Allison joked.

"N, not at all, ma'am. In fact, it's the opposite. The lieutenant colonel is worried that you might get a bad impression from seeing them. I think." René said gravely. Allison nodded.

"Private René!" Wil cried suddenly. Allison turned to Wil, shocked.

"Y, yes, sir!"

“When was it that the men from the other unit arrived?” Wil asked, stone-faced.

“Four days ago, sir.”

“Do you know what they are here for?”

“…Only a rumor going around among the soldiers, sir…”

“Tell us.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve heard they’re here to test out some new seaplane models in the nearby lakes and rivers.”

“Then they must be using that hangar. How many people? How many planes?”

“About six people, sir. And I’ve never seen all of the planes in flight at once, but I think there must be four or five.”

“I see. Is there, by any chance, a double-engine seaplane among them?”

Allison finally realized what Wil was trying getting at.

“Oh, yes, sir. I’ve seen that one.” René replied. Then, he asked hesitantly, “Um… How do you know about that, sir?”

“That doesn’t matter, now, does it?” Allison butted in. Wil continued.

“Was that seaplane flying in the middle of the night two days ago? Did you hear a loud noise before dawn?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, sir. I was on duty then, so I saw the lights go on in the canal and the seaplane touching down…”

Allison nodded at Wil, satisfied. She then turned to the confused private.

“There’s someplace I’d like you to show us.”

“Y, yes, ma’am?”

Allison looked up a the stone building ahead of them.

“I’m not interested in the barracks and the commoners there. Show us around the castle.”

* * *

“Second Lieutenant? Um… You’re in the air force, right?”

A man in his early twenties looked up from his seat.

He was neither fat nor skinny, and had short brown hair and a handsome face. He was wearing long black boots and well-cut navy pants. He also wore a thin blue jacket and a

navy tie. Hanging over either of his shoulders were suspenders, and around his waist was a belt equipped with a holster.

Hanging from the back of his wooden chair was a black leather jacket. On the right arm was the emblem of the curved dagger. On either shoulder was a second lieutenant's badge of rank, and over the left side of the chest was a pilot's badge adorned with the emblem of a spread-winged eagle.

"As you can see." Said the second lieutenant, twirling his hat around his finger. "The name's Carr Benedict. It's a pleasure."

Speaking to the pilot was a repair technician around seventeen or eighteen years of age. She had short hair and was wearing green overalls. She also had the emblem of the curved dagger on her right shoulder.

"Oh! Pardon me. I'm Private First Class, Jyum Elaine!" The technician said, saluting. Benedict also gave her a light salute.

They were currently in the hangar. All around were long metal beams, and the ceiling curved over them in a gentle arc. The interior was large enough to host a ball game.

"Is this a new model? She's amazing." Elaine said, her eyes glinting with enthusiasm. Benedict slowly turned to his right.

Before them was a plane.

The fuselage was streamlined, painted pitch-black. At the front of the frame were a pair of openings for machine gun fire. The cockpit was open, but the front was covered with a windshield. The machine guns could be aimed using a round metal controller.

At the back of the eight-meter long fuselage was a thin water cooling engine. At the very end of the plane was a three-winged propeller. The plane had one main wing spreading over either side of the frame, and the perpendicular tailplanes stuck out above and below. Unlike with most other aircraft, the parallel tailplanes were sticking out from near the nose.

"This is a fighter seaplane, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is."

Underneath the frame were not wheels, but floats. The floats looked very much like the kind attached to canoes for balance, but they were incredibly large. Hanging from either side of the wings were secondary floats.

The main floats were atop a flatcar to allow the seaplane to move on land. The flatcar was a tangle of metal pipes in the shape of a box, and on either side were sturdy wheels. It was currently fastened in place.

"By the way, she's completely made of metal. Not a single piece of lumber in this baby." Said Benedict. The technician looked nothing short of delighted.

"It's like an aeroplane from the future. I can't believe we're capable of building crafts like this now. You know, Second Lieutenant. I just came back from a six-day leave today. And when I stepped in here, the first things I saw were all these amazing new models. You have no idea how excited I am."

Including the one they were looking up at now, there were a total of four planes in the hangar. Two of them were the same model, two-seaters with one seat in front of the other. They were neatly lined up next to each other. Next to them was an amphibious seaplane with two engines above its wings.

The four planes took up most of the hangar. The army's two small liaison aircrafts that usually made home here had been parked outside and covered. They were three-seater biplanes, also equipped with floats.

"Do you like aeroplanes?" Asked Benedict.

"Very much! I'd like to become a pilot. I'm very happy that I became a repair technician and I love my work. But It's my dream to fly these aeroplanes myself one day."

Benedict smiled.

"I used to be in the Royal Army as an infantryman."

"Really?"

"Yeah. After high school, I didn't want to study any more. So instead of going on to university, I joined the Royal Army. But one day, I spotted an aeroplane flying through the sky and fell in love. Just like you. So I began studying to enter the Royal Air Force Officer Academy."

"And you passed the examination, right? That's so wonderful!"

"I guess so. I graduated last year, and now I'm piloting fighter crafts. In that sense, my dreams have come true."

"You're amazing, Second Lieutenant!"

"So that's why you should do your best, too. I'm sure even I have the right to say something like that." Benedict said, winking at the starstruck technician.

"Now, Miss Elaine…"

Still in his seat, he turned to the technician and said plainly,

"If you have some spare time later, would you like to take a walk with me? I've been told that there's a stream in the area where the soldiers bathe and swim sometimes. Why don't you show me how to get there?"

The technician went beet red.

"I, uh… umm…"

"Of course, I don't mean that we should take a bath there or anything like that."

"Um… If you don't mind… I…"

As Elaine took a deep breath and prepared herself, the hangar door opened without warning and four men stepped inside. They ranged in age from twenty to thirty. Three of them were

wearing Royal Air Force uniforms like Benedict. One was a second lieutenant, and the other two were first lieutenants. The last man, who was the tallest of the newcomers, was wearing a Royal Army uniform and sunglasses over his eyes. He was a captain.

Benedict stood with a *Tch* and placed a hand on the technician's shoulder.

"Sorry, but we'll have to talk later."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

With that, Benedict walked over to the door and greeted the men.

"That was quick."

"Have fun watching house, Benedict?" One of the first lieutenants said in a mocking tone.

"Of course." Benedict answered curtly.

"By that, you mean you were chatting up a woman again. Quick as ever." Said the other first lieutenant, gesturing at the worried-looking technician with his chin.

"That's practically tradition in the land I was born in." Benedict snickered, the only hint of politeness in his answer being the words he used. The airmen glared daggers at him.

"Looks like you've got no intention of even trying to get along." Said the youngest of the men, the second lieutenant. "Well?! Say something!"

Benedict's answer was firm.

"In the land I was born in, we don't make a tradition of chatting up men. Especially not the ugly ones."

"Son of a bitch!"

The man grabbed Benedict by the collar. Benedict threw him a sharp stare.

"Stop this." Said the army captain, who had been standing at the back of the commotion. The second lieutenant let Benedict go, frustrated. Benedict straightened out his collar as though nothing had happened.

"Second Lieutenant Carr, you may leave for lunch. Come back here straight afterwards to resume guard duty. Do *not* waste time trying to flirt with the women."

"Yes, Captain Gratz."

Saluting the captain, Benedict walked away. He put on his hat and left the hangar.

"Damned bastard. He's all talk." One of the second lieutenants spat as Benedict departed.

"This is no place for personal vendettas. We are all comrades-in-arms." Said Captain Gratz.

“Why did the colonel bring someone like *him* into the team, I wonder?” Asked the first lieutenant.

“Because there are four fighter planes. Say what you will about his behavior—I’ve heard he’s quite skilled.” Gratz said.

“Really, sir? Better than *us*?” Said a second lieutenant. His two comrades grinned confidently.

“I’d like to take him on one of these days.”

“Could we? What if we asked the colonel to allow us to have a friendly match, if that’s what you want to call it? We’ve got all the ammunition in the world. What do you say, Captain?”

“We have no time for that now. First, we have to make that old bastard talk.”

With that, Captain Gratz pulled off his sunglasses.

He was the man who had come to Makkaniu two days ago, claiming to be from the tax office.

Benedict left the hangar, passing by the command center and entering the barracks, where the mess hall was.

Normally, two guards were stationed at the castle entrance, facing forward. But this time, the guards were twisting their necks as far as they could, trying to peek inside. Benedict spotted two people in blue uniforms walking through the entrance.

“Blue uniforms, huh. Which unit is that supposed to be again?”

He paused for a moment.

“Guess that’s none of my business.”

He resumed walking towards the mess hall.

“The first floor is being used as the offices. It’s currently lunch hour, so there shouldn’t be many people here.” Explained Private René. He, along with Allison and Wil, were walking down the empty hallway.

The floor of the halls were made of wood, and the walls were made of stone. There were slots in the walls at regular intervals for inserting torches, but they were rendered obsolete by the lamps hanging from the ceiling. Multiple pipes were stretching out along the ceiling, having been installed in more recent times.

“When was this castle built, and by whom? Are there any other castles of similar structures?” Wil asked. Allison shot him a glare and elbowed him in the side so René could not see. Wil waved his hand lightly to apologize.

René looked apologetic.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m not really sure. Should I go ask someone?”

"Don't bother. What's above here?" Allison asked.

"This castle is made up of four floors. The second floor is the officers' dining room and their quarters. On the third floor are the command room, the communications room, and the operations room. The fourth floor is not being used at the moment, but I've been told it will serve as the command center for the front lines in the event of a war."

"I see. Is there anything underground?"

"Oh. Yes. It's been preserved the way it was in the past."

Allison narrowed her eyes.

"Oh? What is it used for?"

"The basement is used for storing food and wine. And the old dungeons are being used as a prison. The levels further underground used to be a catacomb; it's been sealed off now."

"Medieval dungeons and catacombs? Sounds interesting."

"It sure does."

Wil sounded honestly enthusiastic. Allison agreed with feigned enthusiasm.

"We'd like to have a look ourselves, Private."

"Th, the catacombs, sir? I, I don't think we're permitted…" René stuttered.

"Then the dungeons will do. Take us there."

"Th, the cells are being guarded by soldiers from the military police. I don't have the authority to-"

Allison shot him a glare. René went silent.

"Just take us there, then. I'll get us permission myself. Which way to the stairs?"

"Th, this way, ma'am…"

Just as Allison, Wil, and Private René arrived at the top of the stairs.

"Give me a big helping of the pickled vegetables." Benedict said to the soldier in charge of handing out the food.

'Just what the hell are you *doing* here,' said the look in the soldier's eye. Benedict replied with a look of his own.

'Shaddap. None of your business.'

Having received his extra serving of pickled vegetables, Benedict took some bread and fruit and put them on his tray.

‘I heard he’s from the Royal Air Force.’

‘Lounging around in the hangar with those new models, I hear.’

‘What’s he doing out here in the countryside?’

‘Bunch of thugs, that’s what they are.’

‘Wish they’d go eat someplace else.’

Benedict looked around the mess hall—at the soldiers who glanced at him occasionally but never tried to talk to him. He found himself an empty seat.

“No female officers around here, huh.”

When they descended the steps, they emerged into a space bathed in yellow incandescent light. The underground was much cooler than the outside because the walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of stone. But it was humid, and there was a stench in the air.

There was a small room furnished with a bookshelf and a ledge. Several bundles of keys hung from the ledge.

There was a hallway stretching out next to the room. Past a set of bars just several meters ahead, the walls to the right were lined with prison cells.

“P, please wait a moment, Warrant Officers.” Said a forty-something sergeant as he stood from his seat at the desk. He had short hair and round glasses, exuding an air of diligence.

“Oh? Explain *why* I have to wait, Sergeant.” Allison said without missing a beat. Private René stiffened.

“…”

“Scary…” Wil muttered under his breath. The sergeant was lost for words.

“Uh, umm… We have one prisoner in our custody at the moment, Warrant Officer. And our facilities are old and worn, so all we have in there are iron bars. If you’d-”

“Who’s inside?” Allison cut in.

“Wh, why do you want to know—”

BANG!

Allison slammed her fist on the desk.

“Maybe the same reason *you* want to know why *I* want to know. I hate it when people ask me stupid questions. Answer me, now!” She cried.

“It’s best not to get her too angry, Sergeant. She’s scary when she gets mad.” Wil confessed.

“W, we have an old man in our custody there.” The sergeant said wearily. Wil swallowed.

“An old man? What’s he in here for?” Allison asked. The sergeant’s reply was mechanical.

“I’ve been told that he’s a spy from Cross-River. He was arrested a few days ago and brought here.”

“A Roxchean spy? Hm. When is the execution? I’d like to see one of those in person.” Allison said, her eyes narrowing. René, standing behind her, began trembling visibly. The sergeant answered her quickly so as to not draw out the difficult situation.

“We don’t know a thing yet, ma’am. No specific charges or anything. We don’t even know if he’s really a spy. Ever since he was brought here, he’s been doing nothing but babble in Roxchean and go around acting like a senile old man. I didn’t think we should show someone like that to officers from the Royal Guard. Until you asked, that is.”

“I see. Thank you for your concern.”

“So please, is that enough for—”

“I don’t mind. Let’s have a look inside.”

“…Understood.”

With a defeated sigh, the sergeant grabbed a bundle of keys and the truncheon hanging from the back of his chair.

“You stay here, Private. That string over there triggers the emergency alarm. Don’t touch it unless I give the order.” The sergeant said to René, and led Allison and Wil down the corridor.

“Come with me, please.”

The thick steel bars were lodged firmly in the stone walls, ceiling, and floor. The sergeant unlocked the door. It slowly swung open with a loud noise.

“This way.”

As the sergeant led the way inside, Wil wiped a droplet of cold sweat on his face.

Telling Allison and Wil that he would check on the prisoner first, the sergeant asked them to wait for a moment. Tightly grasping his truncheon, he slowly walked up to the cell at the very back.

“You’re being pretty quiet today, old man.” Said the sergeant.

A reply came from inside the cell.

“It looks like I’ve got some amazing guests today. I’ll accept them with gratitude. It’s such a shame I couldn’t serve them any tea—my housekeeper’s family sells tea leaves, you know. They gave me some of the best leaves they had in stock. I’m telling the truth this time.”

The man was speaking standard Roxchean. Allison was smiling. Wil clenched his sweaty fists.

“I told you, old man. I don’t understand what you’re saying. But thanks for staying a little calmer today. We’ve got some really important guests here today.” Said the sergeant. The old man replied in Roxchean.

“Ah, yes. I know.”

“You see? We can’t communicate a thing, and you don’t know if he’s going to leap out to try and grab you from behind the bars. So please stay back. This way, please.” The sergeant advised.

Allison and Wil slowly walked up to the small cell. It was furnished with nothing but a bed.

Under the dim light, the old man sat on the bed in the same clothes he had been wearing when he was kidnapped. He looked at Allison and Wil brazenly.

Seeing one another for the first time in two days, the man and the duo stared at one another for some time.

“Um… Warrant Officers?” The sergeant squeaked hesitantly.

Allison turned.

“Is this prisoner supposed to be the spy? He’s just a senile old man!”

“But he was found right next to the buffer zone, ma’am. Apparently he was crossing over on a small boat. I think those clothes he’s wearing right now must be from Cross-River.”

“Hmph.”

Allison made a point of looking into the prison cell. She called to the old man in a mocking voice.

“What are you doing here, anyway? Looking for some fairy-tale treasure?”

And she discreetly tossed the old man a wink.

“I see… You believed what I told you. I can’t imagine how you managed to get a hold of uniforms like that. But it was an excellent idea to use uniforms from the Royal Guard.” The old man mumbled in Roxchean. Allison turned to the sergeant.

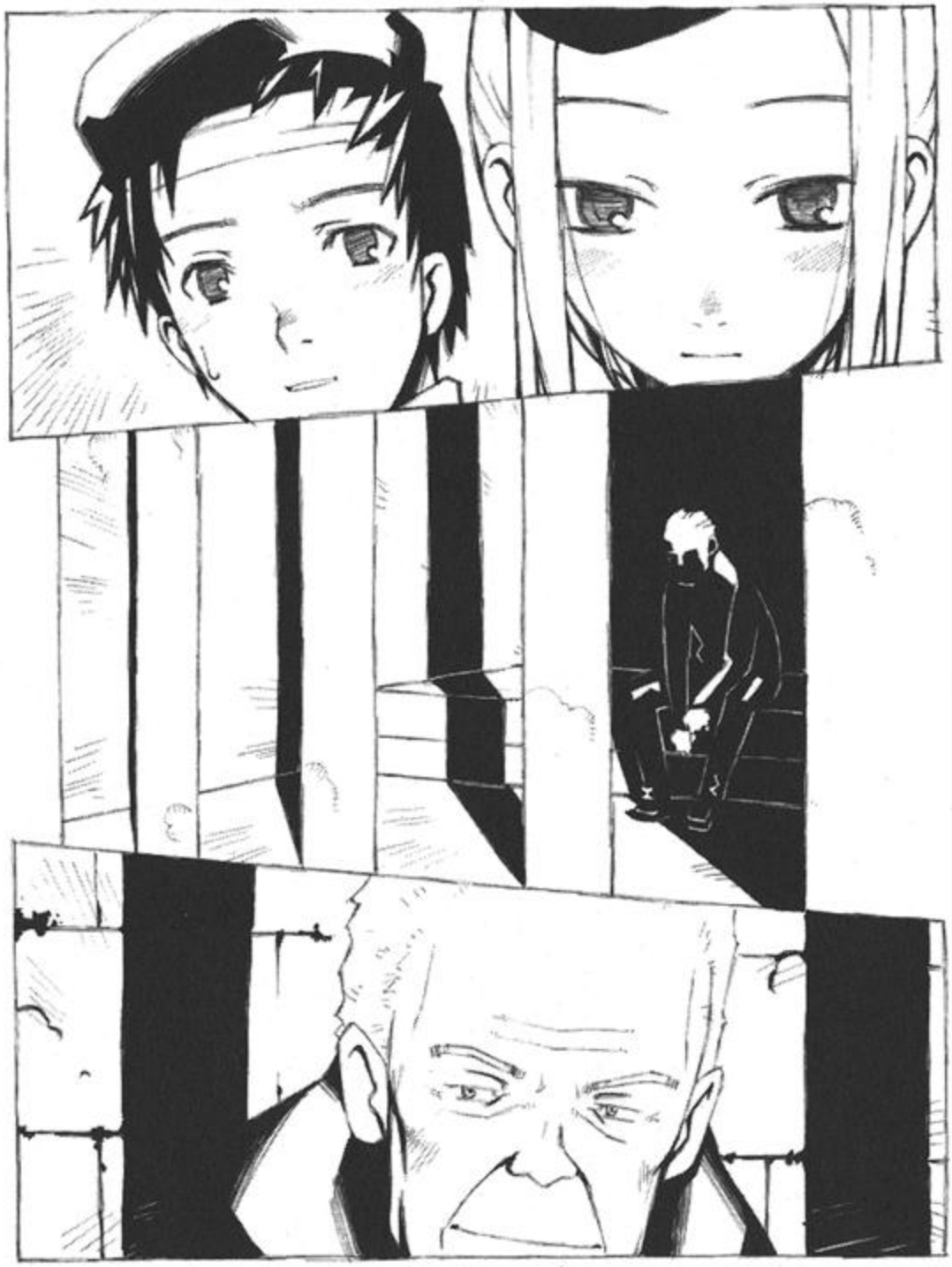
“What did this man just say? Was he complimenting us?”

The sergeant shrugged apologetically.

The old man suddenly turned to face the wall, mumbling as though sleep-talking.

“From what I can tell, the only one who spoke Roxchean was the man who claimed to be from the tax office. I spotted a gun in his pocket, so I went along with him because I thought he might shoot you if I refused to go. I think he must be from the special forces here. He probably remembers your faces. Make sure you do not run into him.”

The old man glanced at Allison and Wil. Wil nodded discreetly.



The old man turned back to the wall and began to mutter to himself again.

"They asked me all kinds of strange questions. Where was the general's stash of gold, they asked. They must have gotten the wrong idea. The treasure I know of can't be compared with gold. I didn't tell them a thing. And I don't intend to let slip anything to those mannerless bastards. Anyway, where is this place? They had me drugged when they kidnapped me."

"Is he always like this? Talking to the walls, I mean." Allison asked the sergeant. He replied that the old man was being relatively calm today.

"That's a bore." Allison said, turning to Wil. "I'm sick of this tour. What do you want to do?"

"We've come all this way into the countryside, so let's have a look around for some entertainment. The closest settlement to the Teruto Base should be Gerrue, twenty kilometers to the west. The next settlement is Coil, fourteen kilometers south of Gerrue… Is there anywhere else, Sergeant?"

"I'm… afraid those are the only towns in the area, sir. This *is* the countryside, after all."

"I see."

Wil nodded. At that moment, the old man in the cell began to bellow at the top of his lungs.

Shouting gibberish for a moment, the old man suddenly leapt onto his bed and lay there. He flailed his arms and legs, then went still. He soon began to mutter as though to himself.

"I know where you must go. It's not far from the river or the mountain range. I know that you're determined to leave. You'll make it if you take a seaplane. You'll be able to find the treasure, too. Can you memorize this?"

Wil suddenly sneezed. Allison turned to him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah… I'm good." Wil replied. He turned to the old man, who began muttering into his bed.

"Fly south from here until you hit the confluence of the Lutoni River. There, go east. At the first fork, turn right. Enter the woods and follow the winding river until you reach a point where you're surrounded by ten-meter-high cliffs on either side. Keep going along the river. When you see a two-peaked mountain about four hundred meters high on your left, find the river that circles around it. There's a plain just west of those peaks; you'll find the caverns there. Make sure to take a very strong light with you. Look for an opening with an army rifle sticking out of the ground in front of it. Go inside, and you'll find yourself in a large cavern. Go into the twelfth hole on your right, and in about twenty paces you'll come out into a large cavern again. You'll find the treasure in the spot where the rifle is sticking out of the ground. That is all. Did you get all that?"

"What is this man saying? Is he trying to cast a spell?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am."

As Allison made small talk with the sergeant, Wil nodded firmly at the old man.

Suddenly, the old man leapt up and jumped at the bars. The sergeant brandished his truncheon at the old man, who cried out at Allison and Wil.

"Stop that! Get back!"

The sergeant hit the bars several times, but the old man continued to scream as though mad. He was speaking in Roxchean still.

"If! If you like what you find! Report it! Reveal it to the world! That amazing treasure! If you can accept it! Show it to everyone! Do what I couldn't do! That is why I returned alone! Just like your teachers taught you! I leave everything to you now! Forget me and go!"

"I told you to stop, old man! Get back!" The sergeant warned, striking the bars again. From behind him, Allison quickly saluted the former lieutenant colonel. Wil nodded once more.

Soon, the old man went silent like a spent clockwork toy. He took his hands off the bars and fell seated onto his bed with a vacuous look. Taking off the shoe from his right foot, he began to giggle at it and mutter to himself.

"There's no need for three people to go. I wish I had a hairpin. I'll stay behind, and in fifteen minutes, I'll make a large commotion. Use that to your advantage. Keep up your act and get a hold of a seaplane. And find the treasure."

The old man tossed the shoe against the wall. It landed on the floor. The old man took off his left shoe and began muttering at it. Allison glanced at her wristwatch.

"Ah… Such interesting children, the two of you. And still so young. I'm sure you have no idea where you should head from this point on. Let me give you a piece of advice. Go where you *want* to go. I pray that the god of fortune will be with you."

Wil put a hand on Allison's shoulder.

"Let's go."

"Right… Now what?"

"Remember what the *lieutenant colonel* said to us before?" Wil said, "let's follow his advice."

"Yeah."

Allison turned to the sergeant.

"Thank you, Sergeant. It was interesting, seeing a madman in person. We'll be going now. Take us to the stairs, please."

"Yes, ma'am." The sergeant said, beginning to leave. Wil followed after him and glanced at the old man.

"Who knows, old man? Maybe we'll get to meet again one day."

"Of course. If you get back before I do, give my regards to Norma for me."

"I had no idea what you're talking about, but goodbye." Allison said, reaching for the back of her neck and then waving at the prison cell.

The hairpin she tossed fell between the small gaps in the bars and landed without a sound in the hands of the former Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan.

"Thanks for that, Sergeant." Allison said at the desk, as they returned to the room where Private René waited.

"N, not at all, Warrant Officer." Said the sergeant, saluting Allison and Wil.

"Let's go." Allison said turning to Private René. He was standing stiff.

"What's wrong?"

"…"

Without answering Allison, the private glanced at Wil's holstered gun.

Wil slowly reached for the holster and undid the leather cover. He drew the gun.

"Did you want to have a look at this gun, Private? Should I give you a demonstration?" He asked.

"Y, no, sir… No…" René stuttered, nodding, and then shaking his head.

"Yes, or no?" Allison chuckled. "It doesn't matter. Let's go upstairs. You put that gun away."

"Right." Wil replied, holstering the gun. René briefly saluted the sergeant and began walking up the steps.

"Damned aristocrats…" The sergeant muttered to himself, hanging the bundle of keys back on the ledge. He hung his truncheon on the back of his chair and took a seat, sighing.

"Finally, some peace and quiet."

At that moment.

"————————! ———————, ——————————!"

A series of incomprehensible words and the sound of the iron bars being battered came from the furthest cell in the hall.

"Give me a break…"

The sergeant sighed.

"Th, the hangar, Warrant Officers? U, understood…"

Private René led Allison and Wil out of the castle. They ran into a female repair technician along the way, and René asked her where the people from the other unit were now. The technician told him that they were in the hangar until just earlier, but that they had gone to nap as they usually did; even before one of their members had even come back from his lunch break, she added. She then flushed an angry shade of red.

“Those people are really awful!”

“Excellent timing. Let’s have a look inside the hangar.” Wil said, glaring at René.

“Y, yes, sir.”

“Argh… Shut up, old man! Stop it!” The sergeant cried, as the old man’s racked continued with no end in sight.

But instead of stopping, the old man began to make an even bigger commotion.

“————————! ————————!”

“This is insane…”

The sergeant took up his truncheon and a bundle of keys, and again opened the bars and entered the corridor. He walked up to the old man’s cell.

“————————! ———!”

The old man was shaking the bars furiously as he screamed.

“Look, old man. Your door’s not going to open that easily.”

“But it’s already open.” The old men replied in Bezelese, looking the sergeant in the eye. The sergeant’s thoughts came to a screeching halt.

Suddenly, the door of the cell swung open. It hit the sergeant and knocked him back against the wall.

“Ugh!”

The old man leapt out in the blink of an eye and struck the sergeant in the gut, knocking him unconscious.

“Gah!”

“I’m sorry about this, Sergeant.” Walter said, helping the limp man onto the floor. He then glanced at the sergeant’s wristwatch.

“Are you from the capital, Second Lieutenant? I’m from the countryside myself, so I always had so many dreams for the big city.”

Carr Benedict was standing in front of one of the barracks, holding his jacket on one arm. Standing in front of him was a starry-eyed young secretary.

Two army warrant officers, having just eaten lunch, passed by them with daggers in their eyes.

‘Gimme a break! Not again!’

‘Hope that womanizer goes to hell.’

Benedict continued chatting with the woman, not even batting an eye at the warrant officers’ glares.

“Really? But the countryside has its own charms, don’t you think? Actually, why don’t you come help me go shopping for gifts nearby after work?”

“Gifts… for your wife, you mean?”

“No, no. I’m not married. I’m thinking of getting a gift for my nephew. The sweetest little kid. Every time I see him, he begs me to let him ride an aeroplane. I always tell him he’s gotta grow up a bit. He’s only three years old right now, you know.”

“Oh my goodness!” The woman chuckled.

“Ugh! You’re awful! You just chat up every girl you meet, don’t you?! You’re no different from the rest of your unit!” Cried the repair technician, who had caught up to him without even eating lunch.

As the two women departed in a huff, Benedict mumbled to himself grimly.

“This better be the first and last time I work with those bastards.”

An infantryman who had been watching from the beginning shot him a look.

‘Just what the heck are you *doing* here?’

‘Shaddap. None of your business.’ Benedict replied with a look of his own.

“Well… I guess I’d better be off, too. They’re all probably asleep by now. And I’m in charge of watching the planes. Great.”

Benedict headed for the hangar. Cutting through the castle, he made it to the entrance when a female soldier happened to step out. They nearly bumped into each other.

“Oh! Excuse me. I’m so sorry.” She apologized.

“Not at all.” Benedict said gently. “Actually, are you busy right now, Miss? There’s something I’d like to ask you…”

The weather was still clear that afternoon. There was nothing in the blue sky but the shining sun. The temperature was rising slowly but surely.

Four repair technicians were standing around the seaplane parked outside the hangar. One of them was a middle-aged man, and the other three were men in their twenties. The repair technicians lifted the covers off the plane and began to do maintenance work.

But as Allison, Wil, and the scared-stiff René briskly approached them, the technicians stopped what they were doing. The young technicians’ gazes were all on Allison.

“Back to work, men. Except you. Come here for a minute.” Allison said, pointing at the oldest technician. The man came down, not knowing what was going on, and saluted Allison and Wil. The other technicians looked on in shock.

“G, good day. Th, the warrant officers here are, are from the Royal Guard. Th, they’re here t, to take a tour of the base.” René stammered. Wil was standing behind him.

“Is this the plane you use on this base?” Allison asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m the foreman of the repair crew.”

“This is a seaplane, correct? Where does it take off from?”

“Over there, Warrant Officer.”

The foreman pointed to a small hut in the field. Next to the hut was a flagpole and a flag used to determine wind conditions—the flag hung limp, as there was no breeze—and next to the flagpole was a small vehicle.

“You can’t see very clearly from here, but there’s a canal we use as a runway over there. We take the planes there on the flatcars.”

“Can they taxi with the flatcars under them?”

“Yes, ma’am. We have vehicles for towing the flatcars, but normally we just take the planes, flatcar and all, to the canal. The flatcar comes loose once it gets into the canal. Then we use that tow over there to pull it up.”

“I see. That’s an interesting mechanism. This might come in handy.” Allison said, resuming her walk. René, Wil, and the foreman followed after her. They stood where they could see the hangar clearly, its wide-open doors and all. Allison looked up at the black planes lined up together and grinned.

“What are those planes?”

“Those… belong to another unit that’s currently training here.” The foreman said, trying to skirt the issue. Allison laughed.

“I see. You see, I really love aeroplanes. One of my relatives owns *several* planes, so I’ve gotten to fly along with him many times. I’ve even taken the controls myself once.”

“Of course.”

“Are all these aeroplanes ready to fly?”

“Yes, ma’am. They’ve been fully fueled and loaded with ammo. ‘Always be prepared’ is our motto.”

“That’s wonderful. I’d expect nothing less.” Allison said, honestly impressed.

“Thank you, Warrant Officer.” The foreman replied abashedly.

“I’d like to try sitting in one of those. Bring me that one. Right now.”

The foreman’s expression went rigid.

A small towing truck with caterpillar tracks soon pulled one of the fighter planes outside. The jet-black frame of the plane made it look rather like a gigantic crow.

The plane Allison had chosen was a two-seater, with one seat in front of the other. The seats were up very high because of the floats underneath, so the technicians placed ladders next to them.

Allison climbed into the pilot’s seat and began firing off one question after another to the foreman, who was in the second seat. Things about the engine’s capabilities; how to start the ignition; the maximum speed; cruising speed; the speeds and angles for takeoff and landing; how to work the machine guns; how to adjust the seats; how to use the radio; and small details about the devices in the pilot’s seat.

“I’m surprised, ma’am. I didn’t think you’d know so much about aeroplanes.”

“You don’t need to compliment me every other minute, so just answer my questions, please. What does this lever do?”

The technicians watched in awe at Allison and the foreman’s conversation. René’s face was covered in cold sweat. And Wil was standing behind him.

“I see. That’s enough.” Allison said, glancing at her wristwatch. As the foreman climbed out of his seat, she asked him if there was a camera around; saying that she and Wil would sit in the aeroplane for a commemorative picture, she demanded that they photograph them, develop the film, and send it to the capital.

The foreman was hesitant; the camera was not for personal use. But Allison would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

“So what? Just bring it.”

She added that she would compensate him as much as necessary.

The foreman had no choice but to obey. The younger technicians excitably asked if they could join Allison in the photograph as well, standing in the back. Allison smiled and agreed.

“But just get the two of us first. Get rid of these ladders and the towing truck; I want it to look like we’re about to take off.”

Allison pointed at Wil and tapped on her wristwatch.

“Get on. Quickly.”

“All right. Be right there.” Wil answered loudly. He then whispered under his breath, so only René could hear.

“Thank you for everything, Mr. René. We really appreciate it.”

“…Ah!”

René flinched, unable to say a word. Wil had spoken to him in Roxchean.

"We're going to escape on that seaplane. Please don't get in our way. If you do, I'm *really* going to shoot you, even if I have to fire from the seaplane. You understand what I'm saying, don't you? Thank you for not saying a word back there in the dungeons."

"Ah… Uh… Ahhhhhh…"

René's teeth were clattering. Wil gave him a tap on the shoulder and said in Bezelese.

"If you'll excuse me."

René fell limply to his knees.

Wil climbed the ladder, carrying his suitcase. Once he was in his seat, the technicians removed the ladders from both of the seats.

Wil opened the suitcase. He took out his and Allison's jackets, aviator hats, and goggles.

"I'm taking the picture now. Please look this way." The technician behind the tripod said, not suspecting a thing.

The moment the foreman noticed René, who was sitting in a heap on the floor, alarm bells went off all across the base.

Chapter 6: Walter's Battle

After pulling the string that triggered the emergency alarm, Walter climbed up to the ground floor. The bells rung through his head as he quickly knocked down two soldiers he happened across with his stolen truncheon.

"All right. Off to the roof." He muttered, grabbing the soldiers' handguns.

Second Lieutenant Carr Benedict and the female soldier he was talking with at the castle entrance were taken by surprise by the sudden alarm.

"Shit. This is *not* my lucky day." He swore, and turned to the soldier. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to talk more some other time."

Winking at the woman, he ran for the hangar.

The second floor.

The second lieutenant, first lieutenants, and Captain Gratz woke to the clamor of the emergency alarm.

"What's all this noise…?"

"Wish they'd just let us sleep in peace."

The second lieutenant and one of the first lieutenants complained.

"An alarm. Be ready, men." Grtaz said, quickly getting up and putting on his uniform.

"Captain Gratz. This is probably just a minor fire or a false alarm." Said the second lieutenant, who was half-asleep with his shirt open.

"…"

Gratz ignored him, slinging his submachine gun over his shoulder and stepping into the hallway.

"!"

The moment he left the room, he ran into a well-built army major and two armed soldiers.

Gratz first saluted the major.

"Sir. What is going on here?"

"We are still investigating." The major replied mechanically.

Suddenly,

"No need for an investigation, my friends! *This* is what's happening!"

A loud voice called from down the corridor. The voice was speaking in Bezelese.

Gratz turned.

"You…"

The major and the soldiers gaped.

An old man was dancing in front of the stairwell.

"Tell me, my friends. Do you like waltzing?"

He was holding a pair of handguns, one in each hand, and dancing jovially.

Gratz quickly loaded his submachine gun.

"Stop!"

"Could you really afford to shoot me, you false tax official?" Walter replied, continuing to dance.

"Damn you…!"

"Catch me if you can!"

As soon as Walter disappeared into the stairwell, the major grabbed Gratz by the shoulder.

"Explain yourself, Captain."

"Major. That man is a Roxchean spy. He must have escaped from his cell. Permission to dispatch an armed unit to capture the man alive? I will provide a detailed explanation afterwards."

With that, Gratz kicked down the door of the room he had been sleeping in. He shouted at the bewildered, half-asleep men.

"The old man has escaped! Alert the colonel!"

The technicians in front of the hangar ran over to the foreman, panicking at the sound of the alarm. The foreman, who was walking over to René, turned and ordered a soldier to find out what was happening.

"Uwaaaaahh…"

The foreman ignored René, who was still sitting with his head in his hands, and cried out to the seaplane.

"Warrant Officers! We have an emergency!"

"Wil!" Allison cried to the back seat.

"Here!" Wil passed her a Roxche Air Force jacket and aviator hat, both embroidered with the Spear of Seron.

"The radio's below you, to the right! Wrap it around your neck so the mic comes under your chin! The talk button's the red one to the bottom-right! The seatbelts are the same as the one from before! Okay?!"

"Got it!"

"Quickly! We're taking off!"

Allison undid her hair, put on her jacket, and wrapped a belt around her neck. It was a throat microphone, which picked up sounds directly from one's vocal cords. Allison put on the Roxche Air Force hat and headset, and put her goggles around her neck.

"Warrant Officers! We're bringing the ladders back! Please, climb back down!" The foreman cried, but Allison ignored him.

Wil put on his jacket and adjusted his holster. Then, he put on his seatbelt and began to fiddle with the microphone and headset.

"Are you ready yet?"

"Give me a second!"

"What is this?"

As he rushed out of the castle, Benedict was shocked to find a seaplane outside the hangar.

He could see someone sitting in the pilot's seat, and it was not the second lieutenant or one of the first lieutenants. He also noticed that the ladders had already been taken away.

"Those imbeciles… What do they think they're doing? Snapping photographs or something?" Benedict spat, looking at the technicians standing around the plane. He spotted a tripod.

"This is outrageous. Who's in charge of keeping an eye out on those bastards? …Wait. That was me."

His pace quickened.

"Just putting on my hat now!" Wil cried. Allison roared at the foreman, who was bringing along the ladder.

"Get back! Never mind us, just stay back!"

Wil spotted a man carrying a black jacket heading in their direction.

"Someone's coming!"

"It's okay! He's not the fake official!"

Wil fumbled with the straps of his aviator hat and cried out to Allison.

"I'm almost done!"

“Hey! What is going on here?! Don’t bring out the planes without permission!” Benedict shouted, finally arriving at the hangar. He then turned to the foreman. “What do you think you’re doing? Why did you let someone onto one of our planes without authorization?!”

“S, Sir! Those two are warrant officers from the Royal Guard Youth Corps. Please ask them to get off the plane!” The foreman pleaded desperately.

“What’s that about the Royal Guard now?”

Benedict looked directly at the person in the pilot’s seat.

“Hey! I don’t know who you are, but get down from there! I know you can hear me!”

Allison turned and shouted back.

“Silence, you commo-”

She froze.

“What?! Anyway, get down! This seaplane is—”

Benedict also froze.

“…”

“…”

They looked at one another for several seconds, the silence between them only broken by the alarm bells.

“No…” Allison gasped.

“*You*?! Y, you’re… You’re *Allison*! Wh, what are you doing here?!” Benedict yelled.

“Not good! The cat’s out of the bag, Wil!”

“What? Wait! Don’t tell me—”

“Yeah! He’s the love letter man!”

“Right…” Wil muttered, finally tying the straps of his hat together.

“Hey! Wait!”

“Done! Ready!”

Benedict and Wil cried at the same time.

“All right! Engines on!”

Allison hit the switch.

The motor began to rumble from inside the engine of the black fighter plane.

A mixture of fuel and air, compressed in the cylinder, was ignited by the spark plug.

The V12 engine easily roared to life. The propellers began to spin.

"This is some excellent maintenance work, everyone! Goodbye! You too, Second Lieutenant!"

Allison cried to the foreman and Benedict. But the plane was so loud that they could not hear her.

The seaplane slowly began to move.

"Hey! Stop right there!"

But the plane did not stop.

"Stop! Stop, or I *will* shoot!" Benedict threatened, pulling out a handgun. It was a six-shot revolver that could be folded in half. He held the gun with both hands, aiming at Allison in the pilot's seat.

"This is no good…" He turned, holstering the gun. Benedict ran for the hangar.

"Whoa!"

René popped up out of nowhere and latched on to him.

"Second Lieutenant! Those two people! They're spies, sir! Spies! From Cross-River!"

"I know that! Get off me! I don't give rides to men!"

"Argh!"

Benedict tossed aside the weeping private. He passed by the thunderstruck repair technicians and sprinted for the telephone installed by the hangar entrance. He chose a recipient and turned the rotary dial. Even as the signal beeped, the fighter plane was growing distant.

"C'mon, pick up already!"

Finally, he reached someone.

<This is the canal. Seaplane spotted preparing for takeoff. Is this an authorized flight, sir?>

So laid-back was the soldier's response that Benedict bellowed into the receiver.

"This is Second Lieutenant Carr! Put a car in front of the ramp! Make sure that seaplane does *not* enter the canal!"

<Sir?>

"Right *now*! They're stealing our plane! Quickly! Move!"

<Y, yes, sir!>

The soldier hung up.

"Damn it all… What in the world is going on here?" Benedict muttered to himself.

"Injure him if necessary. But do *not* kill him. Aim for his limbs." Said Captain Gratz, holding up his submachine gun in one hand. The soldiers standing behind him, armed with rifles, nodded.

They were on the spiral staircase of one of the cylindrical towers used as a lookout point. The soldiers kept their guns trained above them as they slowly climbed upstairs, with Gratz in the lead.

"What a beautiful sight."

Walter was at the top of the tower. The blue sky, the green woods, and the army base were all clear in his eyes. He could even see a fighter plane taxiing towards the canal.

"What a beautiful sight."

Behind him was the door leading into the spiral staircase. It was open. He could hear people approaching from below.

"Not yet."

Walter pointed his gun in the general direction of the door and fired three times. Gratz and his men ducked.

"Station snipers on the other tower to shoot him. But we *must* retrieve him alive. Understand?" Gratz ordered, crouching on the stairs.

<Now we just have to take off!>

Allison's voice ran in Wil's ears. He hurriedly lowered the volume on his headset. The fighter plane's engine was warming up as it neared the canal.

<Can you hear me, Allison?> Wil asked, testing his microphone. Allison responded.

<I hear you, Wil. Check your seatbelt one more time. And make sure to put on your goggles. It's just a little further to the canal. …Huh?>

A soldier leapt into a car by the canal and began to drive. It stopped right in front of the ramp.

"Hey! Out of the way!"

The solider jumped out of the car, and it began to move again. The panicked soldier tried to stop it, but his attempts ended in failure. The car rolled straight down the ramp and into the canal.

"Wh, what is he doing?!" Allison howled.

<I, I’m sorry, sir! I forgot the parking brakes and the car drove into the canal!>

“That’s fine. Keep away from the seaplane; it’s very dangerous. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Benedict hung up.

“That’ll hold ‘em. So… now what? What do I do?”

<What do we do?> Wil asked.

<The canal’s useless now…> Allison replied, stepping down on the left rudder pedal. The plane slowly began to swerve left. A wide, clear area opened up before them.

“…”

In the distance, they could see the gates through which they had entered. And the perfectly straight road leading there.

<Say, Wil.>

<Yeah?>

<There’s a way to take off from here. Although it’s a little dangerous.>

Wil answered immediately.

<All right. Go for it.>

Allison smiled and pulled down her goggles.

<Okay!>

The plane turned in the middle of the road. The nose was pointed directly at the front gates.

<Here we go.>

She wrenched back the throttle lever.

The sound of whirring grew in a gentle crescendo. It reached its peak and filled the forest base with the roar of the engine.

“No… it can’t be…” Benedict gasped.

The seaplane began to taxi on the road, flatcar and all. It sped up, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

Countless eyes fell upon the plane from the windows of the castle and the barracks. The eyes of soldiers and officers, and the eyes of an old man at the top of a tower.

The seaplane continued down the road, gaining speed. White smoke began billowing from the flatcar's two axles, worn out from the friction.

"That's amazing… Is this some sort of a takeoff training, Second Lieutenant?" Asked an ignorant technician.

"No…" Benedict half-mumbled.

"Okay! Keep going!" Allison called to the seaplane. It continued to barrel down the road.

In the shaky scenery flying past them from beyond the windshield, they could see the gate drawing closer and closer.

And when the needle of the speedometer reached a certain point,

"Great! Now, FLY!"

Allison pulled back the control stick, which she had been holding down all this time.

The floats and the flatcar fell off the plane.

The frame lifted off into the sky in a gentle arc.

The flatcar continued down the road all alone.

"They actually made it… Amazing…" Gasped a soldier who had been watching from by the gates.

"Huh? WHOA!"

But he soon spotted the flatcar zooming in his direction. He hurriedly stumbled away. The flatcar crashed into the gates. There was the sound of metal crunching against metal, and sparks flew in the wake of the impact.

<See? We did it!> Allison celebrated.

<C, congrats…> Wil answered, still rattled.

The seaplane was flying over the forest. Under them and to the left, they could see their makeshift runway grow smaller.

Allison tilted the frame to the left and began to swerve towards the Teruto Base.

<What are you doing, Allison?>

<Saying goodbye!>

Allison pressed the machine gun switch. The first shot was loaded by motor power, and the 'Ready to Fire' light came on in the cockpit. The firing lever was above the control stick.

"They actually made it…" Benedict murmured blankly. The seaplane was safely into the air.

It then swerved to the left.

"What?"

Its nose was pointing at the base.

"Is she planning to open fire?"

The fighter plane continued towards the Teruto Base, gliding low near the ground.

There was no time to get ready. The seaplane flew over the barracks and quickly ascended, slipping past the towers.

It then did a 360-degree spin. It was a victory roll, a sort of ceremony done by pilots to celebrate a successful mission.

The seaplane stopped rotating. The engine puffed out a small cloud of black smoke.

"You got me, Allison…"

Benedict looked up into the sky, shielding his eyes from the sun.

The seaplane swerved to the right and disappeared over the roof of the hangar.

"What a beautiful sight."

Walter muttered in Roxchean, still atop the tower.

The seaplane carrying Allison and Wil flew by overhead, bound for the eastern sky.

Suddenly, he spotted someone's shadow on the tower.

"A sniper, eh? I'm not too fond of pain."

Walter leaned against the railing to his right and fell seated on the ground. He quietly looked up at the bright blue sky.

"What a beautiful sight."

He directed his voice to the heavens.

"First Lieutenant Unell Esther. Staff Sergeant Foss Bay. Sergeant First Class Dee Halaki. Second Lieutenant Meen Ted. Staff Sergeant Vincent Welley. Master Sergeant Canira Dawken Kenroff. Sergeant Bel Opus. Second Lieutenant Stol Gemue…"

Walter raised his right hand, and the gun he clutched in it.

"All of you must have wanted to die under such a beautiful sky, too. I'm sorry. I won't ask you to forgive me. Now, curse me all you want. And Norma… I'm sorry. I won't be able to keep my promise to you. Don't blame those two children. This is all my responsibility. I'm sorry."

He placed the barrel against his temple.

“Ah… What a beautiful sight.”

And pulled the trigger.

“What was that?! Who opened fire?!” Captain Gratz cried, looking at the old man’s bloodied corpse at the top of the tower.

“I did *not* give permission to fire!”

The soldiers looked down at the body without a word. One person, who was wearing a radio, timidly spoke up.

“S, sir… none of the snipers shot him.”

“..”

Gratz slowly sat the corpse upright. There was a gun in his right hand. The barrel was stained red.

“Damned bastard…”

Several officers, including Colonel Elcub, were gathered in the command room. The emergency alarm had stopped, and everything was quiet.

“Shit!” The rotund colonel swore, bringing in his three thugs. “Is there a man-shaped *hole* in the dungeons here?!”

The mustached Colonel Elcub, however, sounded utterly serene.

“Why, if it isn’t Colonel Nott. You didn’t have to come all this way.”

“Explain the situation! Where is the old man now?!”

Colonel Nott’s demands were more than enough to earn him the animosity of every soldier in the room.

“I received word from Captain Gratz, Colonel.” Said a signaler. “Um… He reported that the escaped spy shot himself.”

Colonel Nott flushed a furious red.

“What…?”

“That’s a shame.” Said Colonel Elcub, not sounding in the least sympathetic. He ordered the men to lift the state of high alert.

“Ah, by the way, Colonel Nott. What was that fighter plane that took off just now? You know it’s dangerous to do something like that without giving us any notification.”

"I know nothing about any fighter crafts! If you'll excuse us!" Nott howled, and turned to leave with the second lieutenant and the two first lieutenants. At that moment,

"Colonel Nott, sir. You have a call from Second Lieutenant Carr." Said the signaler.

"I'll take it myself. Connect him to the next room."

Colonel Nott and his men entered the next room over. He took the call and heard Benedict's panicked voice.

<Colonel! One of our fighter crafts has been stolen! It was the Roxchean sp- …the Roxcheans!>

"Hm. Explain the situation."

Benedict explained that two Roxcheans had infiltrated the base, contacted the imprisoned old man, and discussed some sort of treasure.

<Agh… Uh… what do I do…?> René said in half-sobs, next to Benedict. <Wh, what am I supposed to do, Second Lieutenant?>

Benedict pushed René aside and continued.

<…And that is how we lost one of our crafts. That is all, sir.>

Benedict neglected to mention that one of the Roxcheans was Allison.

Colonel Nott replied.

"I see. Here are your orders, Second Lieutenant Carr. Follow after them at once on another fighter craft. And order the Roxcheans to fly the stolen craft back to the base."

<Sir.>

"If they try to flee, shoot them down without mercy. They infiltrated this base to make contact with the spy in our custody. The spy has just killed himself. There is a chance that those Roxcheans may return Cross-River with the classified information we codenamed 'The Treasure'. If you cannot bring them back, shoot them down before they cross the border."

<…>

"Is something wrong?"

<But, sir…>

"I am giving you an *order* on the basis of your skill, Second Lieutenant. Or would you prefer that I assign someone else this mission?"

<N, no, sir.>

Colonel Nott hung up.

"Easier than training a dog." He mumbled. He then turned to the first lieutenant, who was listening to the conversation.

“The fighter crafts are equipped with signal transmitters, correct?”

The first lieutenant grinned.

“Yes, sir. Just like the one on Terreur’s biplane. Carr doesn’t know, of course. It’ll run for at least half a day even after the engine’s been shut off. We can track them easily.”

“Good. The three of you, follow after him. If Second Lieutenant Carr shows any sign of suspicious behaviour, kill him. I leave this to you.”

The three men laughed.

“Private! You stay quiet, understand? Do not tell anyone *anything*! Forget everything that happened just now!” Benedict cried after hanging up, and turned to the technicians.

“I’m taking off! Bring out a single-seater!”

As the technicians prepared the fighter craft, Benedict put on his jacket and grabbed his aviator hat and goggles. He hesitated about putting on a parachute, but eventually decided against it.

Lightly equipped, Benedict climbed up the ladder.

“Second Lieutenant! I’m afraid you can’t use the canal yet!” A technician said as Benedict took a seat. “There’s a car in the water, sir. We have to hoist it out of there. Give us a little time!”

“Damn it!”

Benedict put on his hat and goggles.

“Put the ladder away! I’m taking off!”

“Sir?”

“Never mind! Just do it!”

The technician climbed down and took away the ladder. The plane’s engine began to roar.

Benedict’s fighter craft began to warm up as it taxied down the road. The gate grew further and further.

His breathing grew harsh. Benedict glared at the road ahead through his sights.

“If she could do it… so can I!”

The soldiers who were out on the road scattered in panic. Finally, his way was clear.

Benedict pulled back the throttle.

“Another one!”

“What are those bastards thinking?!”

“Move!”

The soldiers who were trying to pull the flatcar out of the gates yelled in confusion.

The second fighter craft came zooming at them, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

“Argh!”

The plane lifted off before it hit the gates, rushing by over the men’s heads.

The second flatcar barreled in their direction, just like the first one had.

But this time, it ran straight through the gates.

Chapter 7: This is, in and of itself

A black fighter plane was flying over the forest.

Allison, sitting in the front seat, spoke to Wil in the back.

<I did it, Wil! I did it! How do you feel?>

<Ugh… I…>

<Hm?>

Wil burst out without even taking a breath.

<Allison! You might not have noticed, but that private knew! He spoke Roxchean! I threatened him as best I could, but I was terrified! If he said anything to anyone, we'd have been finished! We could have been killed any second!>

<Oh. Really?>

<Yes! And that pilot just now!>

<Right… I was really surprised to see him here. I hope he's not still angry that I turned him down.>

<Argh, that was too scary! I never want to do *anything* like this ever again…>

<Really? I actually enjoyed it. Playing dress-up and acting like an aristocrat.>

<…Yeah. Now that I think about it… you did a really convincing job. You were perfect.>

<Thanks!>

<That wasn't a compliment.>

<…Anyway. Do you remember where to go?>

<The old man—the former Lieutenant Colonel McMillan—said, 'Fly south from here until you hit the confluence of the Lutoni River. There, go east. At the first fork, turn right. Enter the woods and follow the winding river until you reach a point where you're surrounded by ten-meter-high cliffs on either side. Keep going along the river. When you see a two-peaked mountain about four hundred meters high on your left, find the river that circles around it. There's a plain just west of those peaks; you'll find the caverns there. Make sure to take a very strong light with you. Look for an opening with an army rifle sticking out of the ground in front of it. Go inside, and you'll find yourself in a large cavern. Go into the twelfth hole on your right, and in about twenty paces you'll come out into a large cavern again. You'll find the treasure in the spot where the rifle is sticking out of the ground'.>

<I expected nothing less from you, Wil! Let's go. We'll find the treasure, and come back for Mr. McMillan. Okay, so we're first heading for the Lutoni River. Once we get close, I'm going to descend a bit and head south.>

<All right. Let's go.>

<There's something I want to try before that, though.>

<What is it?>

<Hold on tight.>

Allison moved the control stick to the right and pulled it back.

"Whoa!"

Wil screamed as the fighter craft began to dive.

Then, the engine's roar grew into a crescendo as the craft rose, then made a large turn perpendicular to the ground.

Once the plane was level again, Allison maneuvered it into a large left turn, then a right turn.

The plane finally returned to level position.

<Wil… This plane is amazing. I've never flown anything like this before.>

Wil replied feebly,

<Allison… this is no time for fooling around—>

<I'm not, Wil. I'm just trying to figure out the craft's capabilities. We'd have trouble on our hands if we got into a dogfight, you know.>

<You're right. So let's get away as fast as we can.>

<Too bad. I've always wanted to fly a fighter plane. Then let me just try one more thing.>

The craft flew into a dive again, headed straight for a plain in the midst of the forest.

A second before raising the nose again, Allison fired off a series of shots into the ground. There was the noise of gunfire, accompanied by some light vibrations in the frame.

"…"

Allison brought the plane back to level position, flying over the woods.

<Wil… you're right. If we *do* get into a dogfight, we should get away as fast as we can.>

Benedict was flying at maximum speed.

On occasion, he slid the craft sideways to search for Allison's plane. Suddenly, his caught sight of something.

"There you are…"

He spotted an aircraft of the same design as his own, flying a little ahead and below from his position.

Benedict descended and loaded his machine gun. The ‘Ready to Fire’ lamp came on.

<Is that the Lutoni River?> Allison asked. Wil looked down.

<No. The Lutoni is much wider than that. This one must be a tributary running parallel to it.>

<I see. A little further, I guess.>

The moment Allison spoke, a black fighter craft appeared next to them. It had approached without warning from underneath, sliding in right next to Allison’s craft.

<Allison!>

<I see it.>

Allison angrily glared to her right. Benedict was in the pilot’s seat, looking her in the eye.

<The love letter man. He’s kinda persistent, huh?>

<Wh, what do we do?>

<He hasn’t opened fire on us, so that must mean…>

They could see Benedict gesturing with his left hand, making a turning motion with his fingers.

<What does that mean, Allison?>

<He’s telling us to go back.>

<And… what happens if we refuse?>

<I’ll ask.>

Allison raised her left fist and made a gesture like she was smashing something.

“…”

Wil looked on, bewildered. A moment later, bullets flew from the nose of Benedict’s plane. He had opened fire. Empty shell casings and clips fell to the distant earth.

<He’s saying he’ll shoot us down.>

<Right… okay.>

Benedict held up his left hand and began to hold up his fingers in a succession of symbols, and repeated the gesture several times.

<What’s that?>

<Maybe he’s telling us some numbers?>

<You’re right.>

Allison adjusted the radio at her seat to a certain frequency. She then spoke.

<Can you hear me, Second Lieutenant Love Letter?>

<Don’t call me that. My name is Carr Benedict. It’s been a while, Allison.>

Wil could hear Benedict’s voice as well.

<It’s been a while, Second Lieutenant Carr. You look like you’re doing well. I’m sorry, but we’re very busy right now, and we don’t have time to chat with you. Would you mind if we went on ahead?> Allison asked.

<Of course not. I want you to come back to the base with me.>

<Oh? Are you asking me out again?>

<Unfortunately, no. I’ve been ordered to either convince you to come back or shoot you down. You entered a Sou Be-Il army base in disguise and took of with one of the Royal Air Force’s fighter crafts. You two are criminals.>

<I see. But I’ll have you know that the crimes started with your people first. We only did this to rescue an old man who was kidnapped from Roxche.>

Benedict was silent for a moment.

<…What do you mean?>

<Allison. I think he’s—> Wil said.

<I think so. Let’s tell him.> Allison nodded.

Allison explained to Benedict that the old man had been kidnapped via seaplane from Roxche to Sou Be-Il. That the Bezelese army seemed to be searching for the general’s gold ingots, which did not actually exist. That the old man’s treasure was something far better, and that they were now on their way to find it. However, Allison followed Wil’s advice and left out the fact that the old man was Lieutenant Colonel McMillan, the man behind the poison gas attack.

<Is all this true?> Benedict asked, astonished.

<So you didn’t know anything after all.>

<So Colonel Nott wasn’t here to test out the new fighter crafts. He was—>

<You were helping him commit a crime. It looks like that colonel of yours is the ringleader.>

<…Damn it! So you were the ones on that craft I shot down before.>

<Yes, but you didn’t land a singe hit. We crash-landed, so don’t put that on your kill count.>

<Right… Thank you for telling me all this.>

<No need. So can we go now?>

<No. You can’t. You’re coming back to the base.>

<Why?>

<I have no proof that what you’ve told me is true. We’ll have to confirm all the details back at the base. And I can’t let you just use a Sou Be-Il craft however you want. As a soldier, I can’t let this slide.>

<You’re surprisingly uptight. Can’t you let us off, just this once?> Allison asked.

<Allison, are you *really* a soldier?>

<Allison, you’re just too flexible.>

Said Benedict and Wil.

<And if we go back to the base,> Allison said, <you’ll put us in the dungeons like you did to that old man. I’d prefer to avoid that.>

<Allison… the old man is dead.>

<What?>

<Did your men kill him, Second Lieutenant Carr?> Will asked.

<You’re the one in the back seat, right? Let me answer. No, we did not kill him. He shot himself right after you took off. I don’t know why he did what he did.>

<I see…>

Before their eyes, a vast body of water—so large it could have been a lake—began to emerge. It was the Lutoni River.

<Allison. That’s it. Let’s get going.>

<Right.>

Allison nodded and turned to Benedict.

Second Lieutenant Carr? We’re not going back to the base. But thanks for telling us everything.>

Several seconds later.

<Allison. Earlier, you said that the treasure was something so valuable it could end the war between Roxche and Sou Be-Il.>

<That’s right.>

<You, and the person in the back… do the two of you really think something like that could exist?>

Allison and Wil nodded firmly in unison.

<I am obligated to fulfill my mission. So I'm going to say once more: demonstrate your intent to return to the base at this instant. If not—>

<If not?> Allison asked, despite already knowing the answer.

<I will open fire.> Benedict replied.

<Look, Second Lieutenant Carr. I respect your attitude. I think I could really learn from your work ethic.>

"I think so too." Wil nodded quietly to himself.

<But we've come this far; we can't back out now.>

<…I see. Then you leave me with no choice.>

<I've got a fighter craft too. It's also got a machine gun.>

<I know that.>

<Then if we win—>

<If you win?>

<Will you come with us to find the treasure?>

<…>

<What do you say?>

<All right. If I'm still alive at that point.>

<Then that's it for negotiations. Oh, wait a second. I'm just going to discuss with my friend here about what to do. Could you give me a second?>

<All right. Finish up before we cross the river.> Benedict said.

<Wil. The plane's going to shake a lot. Are you going to be okay?>

<Are you really going to shoot him down?>

<You're such a nice person, Wil. And no, I'm not. I'm just going to win. That'll solve everything, won't it?>

<…>

<What should we do? If you tell me to stop… I'll surrender. I don't want to put you in danger.>

<What are our chances?>

<Decent, but not 100%.>

<…>

<What do you say?>

<Remember how when we were nine, we went sledding during the winter?>

<Yeah?>

<We were at the hills. You dragged me up the slope, saying we should slide down. I was scared and I didn't want to go. But I couldn't say no, and I ended up sledding down the hill. We went so fast that we ended up flipping over.>

<Oh, right. I remember that.>

<You know, I remember thinking: Before I slid down, I was just scared. Going down the hill was scary, but it was fun. And by the time we ended up landing in a snowdrift, all that fear was gone, and I felt great. If I was all alone, I would never have had the courage to go sledding, and I never would have had such fun. I thought you were amazing, Allison. So now… I'm expecting something even better. I won't tell you to stop. Let's win, and find the treasure. That's all I have to tell you.>

<…Seriously! That's so like you, Wil!>

"What's going on over there?" Benedict wondered, watching Allison gesticulate excitedly.

She soon came back with an answer.

<Second Lieutenant Carr! We've made our choice.>

<And your answer is?>

<'Shaddap and come help us find the treasure'! That is all.>

<…>

Benedict was lost for words.

"You're giving him orders, Allison…" Wil sighed.

<Then let's get started. We'll swerve right and diverge to go face-to-face, then we'll pass each other. What do you say? Let's climb a little higher, too.>

<All right.>

The two planes swerved right together and began to climb southward.

Suddenly, Benedict's plane began to grow distant to their right. It sped up and flew further away.

<What's happening, Allison?>

<We're going to go face-to-face now.>

The moment Allison began to turn right again, Benedict's plane turned in their direction.

<What's that?>

<It's like a ceremony you do before a dogfight. You look one another in the eye, face-to-face, and pass by each other. Then the battle starts.>

The two planes began to fly towards each other.

<What if he opens fire while we're getting closer?>

<Don't worry about it. The second lieutenant wouldn't do that. And I wouldn't, either.>

<It sounds almost like a code of chivalry.>

<Maybe. Anyway, we're going to start attacking as soon as we pass each other by. Hold on, Wil.>

<All right… I'm counting on you, Allison.>

<Yeah.>

The two planes advanced rapidly. Air pressure pressed down on them as they brushed past at arm's length, both Allison and Benedict saluting with their left hands.

"Here goes!"

Allison pulled back the throttle with a cry. She then stepped on the left rudder pedal and pulled the control stick to the left. The plane made a sharp left turn.

As gravity pushed her into her seat, Allison turned and glared at Benedict's plane. Wil could not even turn his head—he looked down at the forest to his left and whispered silently,

"Beautiful…"

Benedict also pushed his engines to full throttle, swerving left. The two fighter crafts each flew in half a circle.

Making a quick turn, Benedict made it behind Allison's plane and put pressure on his right hand, clutching the control stick. His entire body creaked under the increased strain, but he continued to pull back the control.

Allison's plane finally came out of its swerve. The frame slowly tilted to the right, flying parallel to the ground for a moment before tilting and swerving to the right.

Benedict slowed his swerve and flew behind Allison's plane, within firing range. His right index finger reached the trigger.

Allison's craft was within range. But Benedict did not open fire. Instead, he flew in even closer. The stolen plane came into the circle of his crosshairs. It came closer and closer, until the plane was too big to fit in the circle.

At that moment, Allison's plane tilted even further and began to fly upside-down. At the same time, she tilted the nose downward and descended rapidly. The gigantic floats on the bottom of the plane faced the sky as the frame left the crosshairs.

Benedict followed, swerving to the right into a sharp descent. He could see the stolen plane cast in the green backdrop of the ground. The plane's size remained the same, but the green woods below grew closer and closer.

"This time, it's a 9.9mm machine gun. You're not getting away without some damage, Allison. But…"

The nose of Allison's descending craft pointed up again.

Benedict mirrored her move, but with more force. He approached her craft, climbing to the left and approaching the stolen plane as though bearing down from above.

But he had drawn too close; his target was too far from the crosshairs. To the lower right of the circle he could see Allison's goggles, facing in his direction. If he opened fire now, he would hit something for certain.

"Shit!"

Benedict swore yet again as he held off on the machine gun and slowed his turn. Allison's plane grew distant to his left.

"He's really good!" Allison cried, watching Benedict's plane grow distant after approaching their left side.

<Wil! We can win this now! Can you hear me?>

<…Yeah…> Wil said blankly.

"Damn it…"

Benedict groaned, chasing after Allison's plane again. He mimicked her angle as she climbed at maximum speed.

Suddenly, she stopped her ascent. And at a lazy speed unthinkable for a dogfight, she began to turn left.

Benedict approached Allison's plane. The tail of the plane entered his line of sight. It grew closer in the crosshairs.

"All right…"

The moment the engine moved into the middle of the crosshairs, Benedict put pressure on his index finger.

"!"

At that point, he flinched at the sight of the stolen plane, growing closer to his craft against his will. Allison had slowed down without warning. At this point, they were already near the point of colliding in midair.

"Argh!"

A second before the inevitable impact, Benedict made a hard left turn. Allison's craft passed by to his right, flying behind him.

"All right!" Allison exclaimed, opening the throttle and pointing the nose of her plane to the lower left. There in her sights was Benedict's plane, which had pulled out of a near-collision. The man in the cockpit looked at her.

"Damn—"

"Take this!"

Allison opened fire without a moment's hesitation. Countless shots were fired at a rhythmic pace. The rounds hit the top of Benedict's plane in a straight line, before hitting the cockpit.

The green woods and the blue sky reflected in Benedict's eyes instantly turned red. He felt an impact on the back of his head as his body shook several times.

<=>

Benedict's plane was flying nearly level with the ground.

The red fluid covering his face dribbled into his mouth.

It was incredibly bitter.

Benedict reflexively spat out the liquid and reached up to his goggles. He wiped the lenses with his gloves, and the red world gave way to the blue sky. He quickly pulled up the goggles.

The cockpit was dotted with red liquid. But nothing had been damaged.

"…"

His blood-red arms and legs moved as well as they ever did.

"What is this…?"

At that moment, Allison's voice suddenly entered his ears.

<That's a plus one to my kill count!>

Benedict lightly shook his head. He then spotted Allison's craft flying next to him on his left. She was holding up her left hand. Wil was sitting limply in the back seat.

<What is this?> Benedict asked. <You… you got me, didn't you?>

<Yeah, but all we had here were paint bullets.>

From the center of the frame to the nose, Benedict's plane was stained with red paint. It stood out like a sore thumb against the black frame.

<…And did you know that from the start?>

<Of course.>

<…It's my loss. I repeat. It's my loss.>

Benedict flashed Allison a grin.

<Then you're coming with us, right? Follow me.> Allison said, taking the lead. From this position, Benedict could shoot her down with ease.

<Affirmative. I'll comply with your intentions.>

Wiping his goggles, Benedict followed Allison as she turned south.

The two planes were flying in formation once more.

Finally back to a peaceful flight, Allison turned her attention to the back seat.

<Are you okay, Wil?>

<Yeah. I'm just glad I didn't eat anything recently…>

<Take a look behind us. The second lieutenant's coming to help us find the treasure.>

<That sounds great.>

The vast Lutoni River was sided by forests and plains.

Ahead stood the peaks of the Central Mountain Range.

Two planes were flying through the airspace. From the distance, they looked like little more than a pair of dots in the sky.

And two more dots were approaching them from behind.

<Allison.> Benedict said.

<What is it?> Allison asked, looking back. Benedict held up his left hand and held up two fingers. He then pointed behind him with his thumb.

<Once we finish this discussion, I want you to reset your radio frequency and keep quiet for a while. For about fifty seconds, just in case. And make sure to remain in the lead. I'll take care of the rest. Do you understand?>

Allison nodded visibly.

<Wil. We might be in for more turbulence. We have two guests behind us.>

<All right. I trust you two.>

<What?>

<Our new friend, too.>

<Oh, right.>

The moment Allison changed the frequency,

<Benedict, you bastard! Answer me, now!>

A deep voice entered their ears.

"Man, that's one heck of a voice."

Allison turned left and looked behind her. Two fighter crafts of the same model as hers were in flight.

<I hear you. What's the point of screaming into a radio, Second Lieutenant?> Benedict answered. One of the first lieutenants replied,

<Where are you going, Benedict? The base is in the opposite direction. Take the spies and return to Teruto.>

<I refuse.>

<…What did you say?>

<I said, I refuse. I fly for my own purposes now. Consider our affiliation void from this point on.>

<You son of a bitch! Thinking of monopolizing the treasure, are you?!> The second lieutenant in the one-seater plane cried.

"Idiot."

"That nitwit."

The two first lieutenants in the two-seater mumbled simultaneously.

<That's my line. Thanks for keeping me in the dark all this time. Also, Second Lieutenant. Weren't you supposed to keep quiet about the treasure in front of me? Looks like someone needs an intelligence check.>

<Second Lieutenant Benedict. We will shoot you down for failing to obey orders. And you spies there. I know you're listening. If you intend to surrender, move your flaps immediately. If not, we will shoot you down at once.>

Allison's and Benedict's planes continued to fly as they did.

<All right.> Said the first lieutenant. <Second Lieutenant. Shoot down Second Lieutenant Carr Benedict. We'll take the spies.>

<Roger that! Finally!>

The two planes lowered their noses and charged at Allison's and Benedict's planes. As if on cue, Allison's plane and Benedict's plane broke formation. The former swerved to the upper right, and the latter to the lower left.

The single-seater followed the single-seater, and the two-seater followed the two-seater.

<So what was your name again, Second Lieutenant? I have a lot of trouble with men's names, you know.> Benedict said to his pursuer, swerving right.

<Asshole! As if I'd tell you at this point!>

The second lieutenant's plane followed after Benedict's, slowly closing the gap between the crafts.

<Huh. It might be a good idea to tell me, seeing as this is your only chance. I'm going to shoot you down. Run now if that doesn't sound like a good idea. You don't want to die yet, do you?>

<Don't make me laugh! I see those paint splotches! You *lost* to those Roxcheans! Pathetic! You're a disgrace to Sou Be-Il! I'll kill you this instant!>

The second lieutenant pulled the trigger. Two rows of flashes emerged from the nose of his plane. The flashes missed Benedict's swerving plane by a long shot.

<Damn you!>

<That was miserable, Second Lieutenant. A complete waste of taxpayer money.>

At that moment, Benedict's plane disappeared overhead. The second lieutenant's shots disappeared into the distance.

"What?"

He turned and looked up.

"Wha…?"

Benedict's plane was there.

The frame descended as though sliding. Two flashes of light erupted from its nose as bullets pierced the air. The second lieutenant's plane entered the line of fire as though jumping in voluntarily.

The machine gun fire blasted off the second lieutenant's head and landed directly on the engines. The metal covering was blown away; the engine stopped; the fuel caught fire. The plane began to fall to the right, spouting flames and black smoke.

Benedict's plane flew overhead. The smoking wreck exploded in midair, scattering everywhere.

"Goodbye, Second Lieutenant."

With that, Benedict headed off to find his next prey. He could see two fighter planes ahead.

<Damn it!>

<Hey, I'll take the controls! Hey!>

The two first lieutenants were beginning to argue over control of their craft.

Allison's plane was continuously making quick right turns to avoid them. The first lieutenants' plane opened fire, but they missed.

<*I'll* take it!> The man in the second seat cried.

<Just a little more! Shit!>

Allison's plane again evaded them, and swerved left without warning. From that point, the first lieutenants could see black smoke and signs of an explosion in the distance.

<He got Benedict. Perfect. Now we take care of these two.>

<Give me the controls!> The man in the second seat demanded again.

<All right. Take it.>

The man in the front pulled out of the turn and took his hands off the controls. The man in the second seat took hold of the control stick and smoothly turned the nose of their plane towards Allison, who was flying in a straight line. He rapidly gave chase.

<Almost!>

The gap between them was closing. The first lieutenant placed a finger over the trigger.

Allison's plane turned, flying to the lower left. At that moment, another plane appeared before them.

The intruding plane suddenly pointed its nose in the first lieutenants' direction and approached rapidly.

"Wha…?"

"Shit!"

The men cried out in unison.

"Take this!"

Benedict opened fire as he charged at the plane.

The machine gun rounds pummeled clear through the frame and the people sitting inside.

Benedict quickly swerved left, flying past his foes' seaplane.

The plane without a pilot quietly dropped nose-down, and slowly fell into the forest in a trail of smoke. Then, there was an explosive noise, alongside fire and a plume of black smoke.

<Are you all right, Allison?>

<Yes. We didn't take a single hit. Thank you.>

<Not a problem.>

Benedict's plane quickly joined back up with Allison's. The two planes once more resumed their journey south.

<Allison…> Wil said, looking down at the column of smoke. <Are those people… dead?>

<Yeah. They are.> Allison said, sounding no different from usual.

<…I see.>

<I'm not going to clap and cheer about it, Wil. But it's better than being down there ourselves. It's better than you dying.>

<I know…>

Wil looked at the plane flying next to theirs. It was a new black fighter craft of the same model as theirs.

<That aside, it all ended so fast.> He said.

Allison also glanced at Benedict's plane.

<You're right. He's really good. I'd hate to say it, but he's way better than me.>

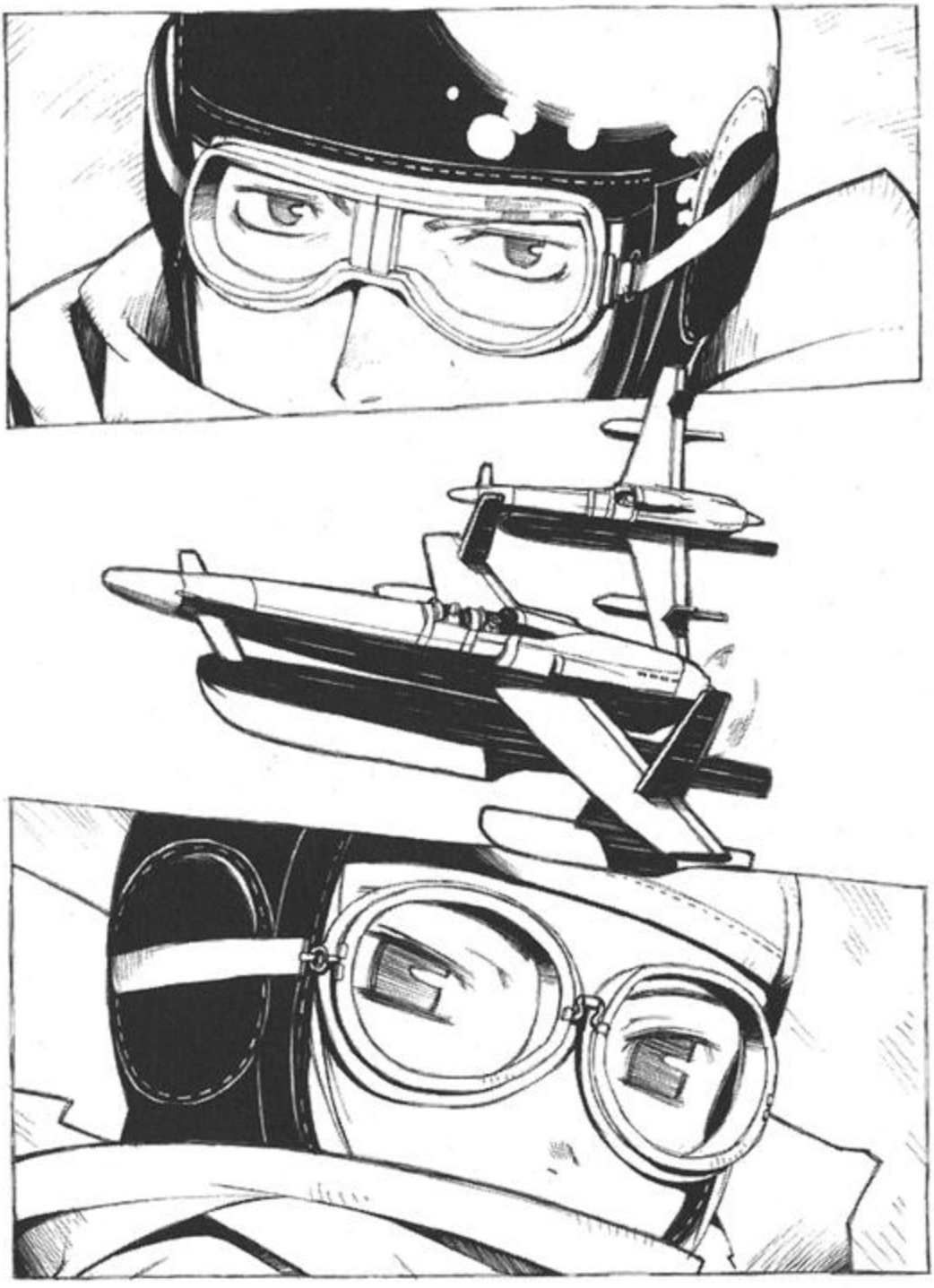
<Then why couldn't he shoot us down earlier?> Wil wondered. Allison answered immediately.

<Because he was aiming for our engine.>

<What does that mean?>

<He was only aiming for our engine, so we wouldn't get hurt. He wanted to force us to make a landing on the Lutoni River. That's why he didn't randomly open fire at us. If this were a war, we'd have been shot down almost immediately.>

<…>



<I knew we only had practice ammunition, so I didn't show him any mercy. It must have hurt.>

<You mean… you knew he didn't mean to kill us?>

<That's right. Would *you* kill someone who sent a love letter to you, even if you were caught in a dogfight?>

<I don't think that'll ever happen to me… But what if he wanted to shoot us down?>

<Then my first recorded kill would end up being my first time being killed.>

<…Looks like we owe him a proper word of thanks.>

<Yeah. Later. Look ahead, Wil.>

Wil looked up. A magnificent scene was opening up before them. The great river to their lower left was beginning to split into two even branches.

<The confluence of the East and West Lutoni Rivers. You don't see a sight like that every day.> Allison said.

"The treasure, huh…" Wil mumbled.

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In front of the Teruto Royal Army Base Hangar.

Two amphibious planes were being warmed up for takeoff.

Sitting in the cockpit was Captain Gratz, wearing his sunglasses. Next to him in the seat was a submachine gun.

Gathered a short distance from the plane were several officers.

"Leaving so soon, Colonel? That's a terrible shame." Said the mustached Colonel Elcub to Colonel Nott.

"I have no patience for sarcasm! If you'll excuse us!" Colonel Nott roared, his voice almost a match for the engines.

"I see. I'd really love to charge you for your stay, as well as the repair costs for our gate."

"Bah. Send the bills to the capital if it makes you happy."

"What should we do with the old man's corpse?" Asked a well-built major.

"We don't need it." Colonel Nott spat. "You take care of it! Throw it to the wolves or something."

He then turned and climbed into the seaplane.

The repair technicians undid the fastening. The seaplane began moving towards the canal.

It entered the canal, taxied for a short distance, then took off. The seaplane disappeared into the distance.

The major mumbled,

“The bastard’s not gonna die a pretty death.”

“Watch your words, Major.” Said Colonel Elcub. He then added, “although I do agree with you.”

The roar of the engines grew dim, then faded altogether.

Colonel Elcub turned to a lieutenant colonel who was standing behind him.

“What of those two aristocrats?”

“I’ve been told that they left before the commotion, saying they were bored to death.” The lieutenant colonel answered.

“Is that so? Finally, some peace and quiet.”

“What were the colonel and his men doing, anyway? Stirring up some trouble to start a little war of their own?”

“Who knows?” Colonel Elcub replied. “War, eh? All we need to do—both here *and* Cross-River—is forget all that and keep up this quiet staring contest for all of time. There are too many fools on both sides who just don’t understand that.”

<=>

<I see. If those are the instructions, we’ll be better off going by river.> Benedict said, as Wil told him the directions. Allison agreed.

The two fighter crafts were flying low over the shores of the Lutoni River. Two shadows glided over the woods.

<I’ll land first. Follow my lead.>

Benedict slowly turned left. Allison followed him onto the air above the river.

Listing off speeds and angles to Allison, Benedict landed in the middle of the river. The floats on his plane drew white wakes on the peaceful surface.

<Don’t push yourself. Take your time and try as many times as necessary to land properly.>

But before Benedict could finish, Allison turned and lowered her speed and altitude.

<…Keep going. You’re doing well.>

She then landed next to Benedict, slowly closed the throttle, and stopped just ahead of Benedict's plane.

<Excellent. Full points.>

<Thank you. This model is really easy to work with.>

The two fighter crafts continued upriver side by side, using their propellers. The Lutoni River flowed at a gentle pace.

<It's almost like being on a boat, but higher.> Wil said, looking around to his left and right. Each side was in perfect symmetry with the other. On the right was a forest in Sou Be-Il, and on the left was a forest in Roxche.

When they reached the confluence of the Lutoni River, they headed left. It was the East Lutoni River, on the side of Roxche. Although the river was half its original width here, it was still hundreds of meters wide.

<Be careful.>

<I know. I've got my feet secured to the seatbelts.>

Wil had gotten up from his seat and sat down on the frame. His line of sight grew wider. He could feel the engine vibrating from the back of the plane. The propellers were still spinning, sucking in air.

<Is that it over there?>

<I think so.>

<I agree.>

They saw a tributary flowing in on their right. And beyond the woods, they saw the land rising up without end. They were at the foot of the Central Mountain Range.

<Come back down, Wil. We're turning right.>

The two planes turned right. Unlike when they were in flight, centrifugal forces forced the planes into a leftward tilt. The supporting floats under the left wings tapped the surface of the water.

The river narrowed considerably, its width now at about fifty meters. Allison informed Benedict and closed the throttle even more. They slowed down.

The edges of the river grew crooked and began to zigzag. The two planes maneuvered towards the center of the river, trying to keep away from the shores.

"Urgh… C'mon…"

Allison grumbled as she carefully controlled her heading with the rudder alone. Cold sweat dribbled down her face.

"Amazing…"

When she looked around, Benedict's plane was following her easily at an even distance.

"Agh… Damn it…"

Benedict grumbled as he carefully controlled his heading with the rudder alone. Cold sweat dribbled down his face.

"Amazing…"

Allison's plane was leading easily at an even pace.

Wil observed their surroundings in awe and mumbled with a chuckle,

"It feels like I'm on a field trip."

Eventually, the river began to run straight again. Its either shores rose up as though encasing it, turning into ten-meter-high cliffs just as Walter described.

The two seaplanes continued down the river. The roars of their engines echoed loudly.

<If someone happened to hear this, I bet they'd be completely confused.> Allison commented.

<Yes. But that's not possible—we're in the middle of the buffer zone. And to add, I've now illegally entered Roxche.> Benedict replied.

<Don't worry about that. Congratulations on your illegal crossing, and welcome to Roxche.>

<Thank you. I'm looking forward to finding the treasure that'll make up for all our misadventure.>

<A two-peaked mountain about four hundred meters high… I think that's it.>

Allison and Benedict agreed with Wil. The cliffs on either side had given way to gentle slopes, and on their left they could see the mountain.

They found the river that encircled the mountain. It did not branch out into smaller streams, and instead flowed straight into a field at the foot of the mountains.

<Let's stop here.> Wil said.

<I'll go first. We'll stay on course, going as slowly a possible. If I'm successful, follow my lead.> Benedict said, opening the throttle and taking the lead.

Benedict chose a shore on the inner side of a leftward curve in the river. It was a gentle slope where the current was slow. Keeping up an awkward pace, he pointed the nose of his plane at the shore, and shut off the engines a second before making contact with land. The plane stopped when the floats were about halfway on the sand.

Benedict took out a rope ladder from under his seat and climbed it down onto the shore. He grabbed a rope that was stowed under the frame and secured it onto a pair of hooks on the floats, and tied either end of the rope on two trees nearby.

He then guided Allison as her plane came to a stop beside his, and expertly secured it with another rope.

Allison stepped onto the shore, taking off her jacket.

"Thank you, Second Lieutenant. Would you like a tip?"

Benedict was bewildered to see her in a Royal Guard uniform, but managed to shoot back.

"Not at all, Warrant Officer. Where in the world did you get a hold of that uniform?"

"That's a secret."

Wil disembarked, carrying their suitcase.

"Let me introduce you, Second Lieutenant Carr. This is Wil—Wilhelm Schultz. He's an old friend of mine. Wil, this is Second Lieutenant Carr."

"Carr Benedict. As you can see, I'm from the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force."

Benedict offered Wil a handshake. Wil accepted it.

"Th, thank you." Wil said.

"Hm? What for?"

"For making sure Allison wasn't shot during that dogfight."

Benedict was a little surprised.

"Oh… You're an interesting person. It's a pleasure to meet you, Wil."

"The pleasure's all mine."

"What happened with your head? Are you injured?" Benedict asked, looking at Wil's bandages.

"No, I just got into some trouble trying to play hero."

"I see."

"As someone who *saw* you playing hero, I've gotta say you looked pretty cool." Allison said. Wil grinned.

"Let's be off, then. We're going on a treasure hunt."

They looked up at the mountain. Before them was a vast forest.

Wil suggested that, at the very least, they should change their shirts. He and Allison put their Royal Guard jackets and hats into their suitcase, and changed into their own shoes.

Allison tied her own jacket and bag around her waist. Wil put on his bloodstained shirt and slung the suitcase over his back like a knapsack. The gun, however, would not fit inside. He kept it on a holster at his side.

Benedict put on a black jacket, and clipped a survival pack from the seaplane onto his belt.

Allison wondered if he wouldn't get hot, to which Benedict replied,

"Patience is an officer's virtue. …Or I should say, a man's virtue."

<=>

They walked through the woods. All kinds of trees were growing on the gentle, grassy slope. Although the way was by no means overgrown, it was still difficult to see where they were going.

"Stay close. We'll have a lot of trouble on our hands if we get separated." Benedict said, taking the lead and clearing a path through tall grass and branches. He also kept an eye out for caves to his left.

"I get it." Wil mumbled. Allison asked him what he was talking about.

"He kept his jacket on because he was going to take the lead and clear out a path for us."

"That makes sense. You're really good at this, aren't you, Second Lieutenant?"

"Well, yeah." Benedict replied. "I did this a lot back in the army."

"It really was a good idea to bring him along."

"…You don't have to put it that way, Allison…"

"You think so? But I'll make sure the three of us split the treasure fairly once we find it."

"No, I mean…"

Benedict chuckled bitterly as he made a way through the foliage.

Eventually, they spotted a cavern. It was overgrown on top, but the opening was large enough for a person to enter without crouching.

They scanned the interior with a flashlight. The dank cavern continued, but they spotted no rifle.

"Not here."

"Let's make a note of this place and search for the next cavern."

They discovered several more similar caverns along the way. Some were too small to enter, and others suddenly dropped off into a deeper level. They did not find a rifle anywhere.

"It might have fallen, or it might have been buried. It *has* been thirty years since then."

"Maybe."

They took a short rest for Wil's sake and quickly wolfed down some rations. Then, they set off once more. The sun began to set between the trees.

"This is the tenth one." Allison said, pushing aside the foliage and peering inside with a flashlight.

"Hey, guys… I don't think we're going to have to look for cavern #11."

Benedict and Wil looked inside.

The cavern opening was large enough to enter upright. The light from their flashlights were focused on an old rifle. The metal was rusted red with age, and the wood was on the verge of rotting completely. But the rifle was still firmly stuck in the floor of the cavern.

Just as Walter had told them, when they stepped inside they found themselves in a large cavern. It was about the size of a classroom, and was located partly underground. Underfoot was damp stone, and stalactites were hanging from the ceiling. The light from the entrance dimly illuminated the interior.

"This must be it."

Allison's voice echoed loudly against the walls of the cavern.

"This must be a limestone cave. There must be a lot of these in the area."

"Okay. Where to next?"

"Wil."

"The twelfth hole on the right."

Benedict pointed his flashlight at the right side of the cavern. The three began to walk, counting the openings.

"Twelve…"

"Here."

"This must be it."

The three flashlights stopped over one large opening. It was large enough to pass though upright, and the path led down in a gentle slope.

Benedict hung his handkerchief in front of the opening.

"I'm putting this here just in case. Now we take twenty steps, correct? Would you mind if I took the lead?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

"It's an honor."

Before Benedict could finish his sentence, Allison added,

"You're the tallest one here. Please tell us if you hit your head on something along the way."

"…"

Wil was astonished. Benedict chuckled wryly.

"Aren't you nervous at all, Allison?"

"In my own way, yes." Allison replied.

"Nineteen… twenty… there."

Benedict took several more steps forward, then moved aside and led his companions into the large area.

"Wow. This is amazing."

"It's just like the old man said…"

The path quickly gave way to a wide space with high ceilings. The floor was nearly level, and it was impossible to see where the cavern ended even with the flashlights.

The beams of light moved from one place to another in the pitch-black darkness.

"This must be it. Look over there." Wil said. His flashlight was pointing at a rifle stuck in the ground about twenty meters away.

"Wait, Allison." Benedict said as Allison moved. He took out a mirror from his bag and propped it up near the path from which they had come.

"Once we go all the way inside, we won't know how to get back out."

"Oh. Thank you. Can we go in now?"

"Don't rush."

Keeping their flashlights trained on the damp ground, the three carefully approached the rifle.

"I can't be sure, but this gun doesn't look Bezelese." Benedict said. Allison spoke up.

"The treasure must be here somewhere. Congratulations, everyone."

"But…" Wil trailed off.

"It might be a lot of work to try and search this entire cavern." Benedict said, surveying their surroundings.

"But we have to. We're going to comb every inch of this place."

"It'll be trouble if we get separated in here." Wil said. Benedict agreed.

"That's right. And we can't go too far from the entrance. Both of you, turn off your flashlights for a second."

The three turned out their lights, one by one. The cavern was filled with darkness. They could see nothing, even with their eyes wide open.

"See? I can't even tell where the two of you are from here. If we run out of batteries while we're inside, we won't make it out alive."

Benedict turned on his flashlight once more and pointed it at the mirror by the entrance.

"We'll need a lot of rope, some stronger lights, and some more people."

"I wish he'd have at least left us a clue." Allison pouted.

"…"

Wil brought his light to the rifle again. The wooden stock was not as badly decayed as the one outside.

"Here!"

"What?"

Wil crouched by the rifle and leaned in close to the stock.

"This must be a hint. I see letters carved into the wood. It's in both Roxchean and Bezelese."

"Read it."

"Read it."

Wil nodded and read out the message.

"'A beautiful sight'."

Several seconds passed by in silence.

"What?"

"Is that all?"

Allison and Benedict asked.

"…That's all. It's the same thing in both languages. 'A beautiful sight'."

Wil examined the flip side of the stock.

"Nothing. That's it."

"Seriously… that old man…" Allison grumbled.

"A beautiful sight…?"

Wil stood.

"A beautiful sight…"

Mumbling quietly to himself, he looked up, holding up the rifle in his hand.

Wil looked up at the rocky walls.

"There… Both of you. Look up at the wall behind us."

Allison and Benedict pointed their flashlights at the walls in unison.

Three lights illuminated the smooth stone walls. There they saw pictures. Pictures on the grey surfaces.

Humans drawn in black, leading along a brown bull. Next to them was a small, four-legged creature, likely a dog or a monkey.

"Murals…" Benedict said, following the images with his flashlight.

There were other pictures on the walls. People surrounding a red fire. Men carrying what looked to be bows. Although the people's faces were not drawn in, everything else was surprisingly realistic. The images were even shaded.

"These murals… they're from a time when written script didn't exist." Wil said.

"Is this what we were looking for? That treasure the old man was so excited to find?" Allison wondered. There was a moment of silence.

"I don't think so." Wil said tentatively.

"I agree." Benedict said.

"Why?" Allison asked.

"This definitely is a rare find. It's a valuable academic resource. But murals like this have been found in several other places." Benedict replied.

"Is that true, Wil?"

"Yeah… There's a place called Ban'na Valley in the Principality of Touls on the southeastern tip of Roxche. They found murals like this there. The geology is similar—lots of limestone caverns. They found tools and bones of ancient people. The people who lived there are called the Ban'na people. And I heard about this on the news, but they found archeological evidence just like that in Sou Be-Il, near the capital. And there are a few other places, too. Although none of the discoveries were near the Lutoni River."

"Huh. So there were a lot of them, huh. Then even if we report this—"

"It won't be earth-shattering news by any stretch of the imagination." Benedict said firmly. "But there *will* be conflict."

"What?" Allison gasped. Wil chimed in.

"I agree. I think this might cause strife between Roxche and Sou Be-Il. Let's say both sides dispatch archaeologists to the cavern. The Roxcheans will just say, 'these murals were drawn by the Ban'na people. This is evidence that their civilization expanded to this area, and even to the West'."

"I think so too. The scholars from the Royal Academy of Science will claim that these are similar to the murals they found in Sfrestus, and claim this as evidence that humanity originated in the West, and that the Roxchean people and their culture were an offshoot of ours."

"Oh. *That* argument again. This is stupid." Allison groaned.

Wil surveyed the mural, moving his flashlight.

A scene of many people lined up to listen to one person's speech. A person sleeping in the midst of splotches of particularly vibrant colors. It was probably a funeral scene.

"Still, this is fascinating. I'm happy I got a chance to see this, if nothing else." Wil said.

Allison sounded a little angry.

"But Wil. The old man said that the treasure could bring peace between Roxche and Sou Be-Il. If *this* is the treasure he was talking about… he was really blowing things out of proportion."

"Maybe. But this is still something very important."

"…"

"Wil. Can you tell me when the murals in Roxche were found?" Benedict asked.

"Twenty-four years ago."

"Of course… That's about the same time as the ones on our side, if I remember correctly. In that case, it's understandable." Benedict said, crestfallen.

"You're right. That's probably what happened." Wil agreed. Allison demanded that she be told what they were talking about.

"The old man found this mural during the Great War. In other words, over thirty years ago. At the time, no one knew that ancient people left such intricate drawings on the walls that still survived, almost completely intact." Wil explained.

"Oh. I get it."

"It's not surprising that he was ecstatic to see something like this. I'm sure I would have reacted the same way if I were in his shoes. And if he never paid attention to the news

afterwards and continued to remind himself that he found something great, he might have ended up inflating the value of these murals in his head."

"Right… you're right. You're probably right."

Allison turned off her flashlight.

Wil turned his flashlight towards her hand.

"Can I borrow that?"

"Why?"

"I just want to take a closer look at the murals. These people lived here over ten thousand years ago and left such amazing works of art. And the colors haven't been distorted or changed at all, just like frescoes. This is a really valuable sight. Even if, in the worst-case scenario, the old man was mistaken, I still think this is a treasure in and of itself."

"A treasure in and of itself, huh. …Here."

Wil examined the murals, holding Allison's flashlight in his left hand. There was a person riding a horse. People putting on some sort of clothing. A woman who looked to be pregnant. A pair of animals—mother and child—most likely sheep.

"But if you're right… this is a pretty big disappointment." Allison said.

"Agreed. It's… a little disheartening."

Benedict also turned out his light.

Wil was still taking in the murals, turning and shifting the flashlights. There were images just above the entrance as well. People lined up in orderly rows, and men doing something at the front of the people.

When Wil shifted his flashlight once more, he caught sight of something.

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"…"

At first, he was not sure if he had found it. Wil fell into thought.

"Oh…"

Once he understood what he had seen, he exclaimed softly.

"Oh… ah… ah… it's… ah…"

Then, he found himself unable to parse together coherent words altogether. He froze with his eyes as wide as dinner plates. His hands and feet would not move.

"…"

He desperately tried to move his mouth, at least. But he could not bring himself to do much more than gape like a fish begging for food.

Wil managed to shut his eyes. He then counted to five in his head, opened his eyes again, and looked upon the discovery once more.

"Ah…"

It was right there.

"The treasure…" Wil gasped.

"Whoa."

"Ow."

Benedict and Allison suddenly found light shining directly into their eyes. They covered their faces. Wil was pointing his flashlight at the two of them.

"Cut that out, Wil." Allison said. The light slid down to her shoulder. Allison and Benedict were standing side-by-side. From Wil's perspective, Allison was on the left, and Benedict was on the right. Allison's left shoulder and Benedict's right shoulder came into view at once. As did the Spear of Seron and the Curved Dagger on their arms.

Wil said nothing. He would not even move.

"What's wrong, Wil?" Asked Allison.

Benedict turned on his own flashlight and pointed it at Wil.

In the light, they could see that he was smiling.

Allison and Benedict exchanged glances. They were both confused.

"What's wrong?" Allison repeated.

"It's beautiful… so beautiful." Wil said, awestruck.

"What?"

"I saw something beautiful. I really did."

"I, is your head all right?" Allison asked. Although she was obviously joking, Wil nodded.

"Yeah. Although I almost thought it wasn't. I held on. I don't think I'm going to react quite as badly much as the old man did, though."

"Say, Wil?"

Allison and Benedict exchanged glances again.

"Both of you. Take a deep breath before you look."

"Wil?"

Without another word, Wil moved his flashlight away from Allison and Benedict.

He then turned, illuminating the treasure.

They could see the mural on the wall.

Several people standing in a row, and men doing something just above them.

Perhaps they were taking part in some sort of a ritual. The men were dressed in different colors and reaching out their hands towards something in the center.

It was an intricate beacon. It was made of wood, and was about the height of a person. In the middle of the structure was a black rod. Its pointed end was lodged in the ground, the tip shaped like an arrowhead to secure it in the ground.

At the top of the rod was a crescent-shaped object, its either ends pointed upwards. In the middle of the gentle arc of the crescent, and at either of its tips, were drawn red zigzag patterns. Warm colors were drawn around it. The zigzags must have symbolized fire.

"It's a picture of a beacon? So what?" Allison asked.

"There's more to the mural." Wil replied, moving the light upwards.

The next image was there. Two men stood side-by-side, each holding something in their hands.

On the right stood a man holding the rod of the beacon in his right hand. The lower tip was in the shape of an arrowhead, and the part near the top which crossed the crescent in the previous picture was a little thicker than everything below. The man was holding the beacon by this part. At the very top of the rod was a flame.

On the right stood a man holding the crescent in his left hand. The fire had gone out from one of the sides, which was the part by which the man was holding the crescent. On the other end of the crescent, the flame continued to burn.

"Does this mean that they shared the beacon and the fire with one another?" Allison asked.

"Yeah." Wil replied. At that moment,

"Ah! …AAAAAAAHHHHH!" Benedict yelled without warning. Allison flinched at the sudden sound.

"What's wrong? Hey? Wil, what's going on here?"

Wil once more pointed his flashlight at the two soldiers' shoulders.

Allison looked down at the two emblems in the light.

"What…?

She then looked back up at the mural.

“Hey… Are those… the emblems on our uniforms?”

Wil nodded.

“That’s it, Allison. This is the origin of both. Roxche’s Spear of Seron and Sou Be-Il’s Curved Dagger. These designs have been around since ancient times.”

“And that’s… the treasure?”

Wil nodded firmly.

“This mural can clear up the dispute between the two sides. We can clarify which side humanity originated from. The old man was right.”

Benedict chimed in excitedly.

“He certainly was! This is an incredible discovery, Allison! I don’t believe this! Incredible!”

Allison looked up at the mural again and mumbled to herself.

“It’s a little—I mean, a lot different from what I imaged a treasure would be.”

She then smiled and turned to Wil.

“So, was it worth it?”

Wil smiled back and nodded profusely.

“Yeah. It really was, Allison. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. As long as you’re happy, I am too.”

Allison looked up at the treasure.

“It’s really nothing like what I imagined, but…”

She smiled, her eyes narrowing.

“Well, I guess this is a treasure in and of itself.”

Wil slowly approached Allison and Benedict, and returned their flashlights. This time, the three looked up at the murals with their own lights.

For some time, they examined the drawings without saying a word.

Benedict eventually broke the silence.

“Heh… I remember what they taught me in school. That the curved dagger was a dangerous weapon made by proud warriors of the past. That the blade was meant to slit the throats of the loathsome enemies in the East.”

Wil smiled.

"I was always taught that the Spear of Seron was made to pierce the barbarians of the land of dusk."

Allison chuckled.

"That was a total lie, wasn't it? They weren't even weapons in the first place."

"That's right. Today, history changes. It's a wonderful day." Benedict said."

"The most important thing isn't 'how to convey the truth', but 'how we convey only certain facts for the most advantageous conclusion'…" Wil mumbled.

"But why didn't that old man announce this discovery when he first stumbled on these murals?" Benedict wondered, "if he did, he would have gone down in history. At this point, I don't think any amount of thanks will be enough."

"You probably know his name already, Second Lieutenant." Wil said.

"Hm?"

"There's something we've been hiding about him until now."

Wil looked at Allison. She nodded.

"We're sorry for keeping this secret from you. But I'm sure you'll understand once we explain. The old man's name was Walter McMillan. He was a lieutenant colonel during the Great War, and a member of the Roxchean Army's special forces."

"…"

Benedict thought for a moment, then spoke up.

"Aha! I've heard the name before. There's no one in the Sou Be-Il military who doesn't know his name. How could I forget? Especially since I was an infantryman. They wouldn't stop lecturing us about the dangers and inhumanity of poison gas… But you mean… Ah! *That's* when he found—"

"Yes. He was hiding in this cavern just before the poison gas attack, when he happened to come across these murals. Of all the times, it had to be just before he launched an attack that would kill thousands of people. Even though this discovery could have ended the war there and then. I'm sure he must have been torn apart."

Benedict closed his eyes.

"…Of course. I understand. And it was likely that neither side would accept evidence like this in the middle of, or just after a war. And if a majority of the people felt that way… then these murals might have ended up being destroyed. And then nothing would ever have been fixed. This treasure would have been forever."

"Yeah."

"Is it okay to announce it *now*?" Allison wondered.

"I think it will be, now."

"*Because* it's now."

Benedict and Wil replied.

They pointed their lights to the murals again. They stared in silence once more.

"It looks better and better the more I look at it. I have to thank Mr. McMillan." Allison said.

"Hey, sorry… I need to get some air." Wil said suddenly, and walked off towards the mirror alone.

"Is something wrong?" Allison wondered. "Anyway, it looks like all our hard work finally paid off.

"It did. This is—really, it's incredible." Benedict nodded.

He then turned, taking a deep breath. Then he exhaled.

"Allison."

"Yes?"

"Marry me."

"What?"

Allison looked at him. He was looking at her intently.

"Um… what did you just say?"

"I asked you to marry me. In other words, this is a proposal."

"Uh… what…? What does…? Um…"

"I think you're incredibly charming, Allison. I know you shot me down once before, but we ended up meeting again, discovering a world-changing treasure in the process. I think ours was a serendipitous reunion."

"Uh… I… guess… it might be…? Um…"

"You and I are soldiers from the East and West. In other words, we were technically at each other's throats. But if we announce this discovery and our marriage to the world together… there would be nothing more romantic, wouldn't you agree? I'm sure countless people will give us their blessings. I'm not joking around with you. I'm being completely serious. I'm asking you now because I think this might be the best time."

Allison's arm swung through the air. Her light moved in all directions, but eventually stopped at the ground. Allison's eyes, however, were still wandering.

"Uh… well… you see…"

"Allison. Staff Sergeant Allison Whittington. Will you marry me?"

"Uhh… Oh, right. Maybe we should get a second opinion…"

Allison waved her flashlight. There was no one else in the cavern.

"Maybe Wil stepped out to give us some privacy." Benedict said, hooking his flashlight onto his belt.

"Allison."

"Whoa!"

In the dim light, Benedict placed his hands on Allison's shoulders. He then stated solemnly,

"In Sou Be-Il, it's said that marriages between pilots are blessed."

"Uh, well… I.."

Benedict gently bent forward. His face drew near to Allison's.

"May the blessings of the god of love be with us for all eternity—"

"Uh… wait. Wha…?"

As Allison stammered in confusion, Benedict leaned in close.

"…Wil…"

One name escaped Allison's lips. Benedict froze for a moment.

He frowned slightly and mumbled,

"…Sorry. But the first to shoot takes the kill."

He slowly brought his lips to hers.

A slight distance away, Wilhelm Schultz froze as he watched two figures in the dim light. The echo in the caverns was loud enough that he could hear every detail of their conversation, and he could understand exactly what they were talking about.

"…"

Wil slowly reached for his holster.

"…"

He opened the cover slowly, so as to not make a sound, and pulled out the gun—the gun Ladia gave him as a good-luck charm—with his right hand. It was already loaded.

"I can't let this happen…"

The weight of the gun heavy in his hand, Wil mumbled in silence as though in prayer.

“I can’t let this happen now…”

Wil glared at the figures.

“This is murder…”

Listening to the conversation, Wil slowly raised the hammer.

There was a *click*, but the figures did not notice. Wil then disarmed the safety.

“But…”

Placing his left hand over his right, Wil slowly raised his gun. He then got into shooting position, as he had done so many times in the past in practice and at the competition.

“I don’t know which is the right answer. I just don’t know. But…”

Of the two figures, he took aim at the taller silhouette. The barrel of his gun was pointed squarely at the man’s head, not trembling in the least.

Wil’s index finger reached the trigger.

“I…”

He opened fire.

An ear-shattering noise rang throughout the cavern.

“Whoa!”

Allison was jolted back to her sense by the noise.

“Huh?”

When she looked up, she saw Benedict’s profiled face.

“What…?”

“What was that noise?” Benedict wondered, his hands still on Allison’s shoulders.

“That… That was gunfire!”

Benedict looked up at the direction of the sound.

“From the entrance…”

“Oh no! Wil!”

At that moment, a second gunshot rang out through the cavern. It was a lighter sound than the first one.

“Damn it!”

“What’s going on?”

“He must have opened fire.” Benedict said, pointing his flashlight at his holster and checking for his gun.

“Then… Wil!”

Allison rushed over to the entrance. Benedict caught up quickly. He pulled a revolver from his holster and ran ahed of her.

“Turn out your light! I’ll take the lead!”

They turned out their lights and groped through the darkness. Along the way, they heard three more shots. They were all on the lighter side.

They could see faint light coming from the cavern entrance. There was another gunshot. And once they were just a few steps from the main cavern—

“Freeze!”

They heard Wil’s voice.

“Wil!”

Allison ran from Benedict’s side and turned on her flashlight.

The light of dusk was filtering into the main cavern. Wil was sitting behind a boulder with his knees in front of him, taking aim with both hands.

“Wil! Are you okay?”

“Yeah! But that’s not the problem right now!”

Wil’s aim was locked on a rotund man in uniform, who was standing at the entryway. The man was holding a smoking revolver.

“Colonel Nott…” Benedict growled. There was a man lying still at the colonel’s feet. Next to him on the ground was a submachine gun equipped with a flashlight.

“Captain Gratz… you came after us…”

“Damn you, Second Lieutenant Carr!” Colonel Nott roared, glaring at Benedict.

“Don’t move! I know you’re out of ammunition!” Wil threatened.

“Shit!”

Colonel Nott threw away his revolver. Once the sound of his gun rolling on the ground came to a stop, everything went silent.

“Wil… you’re not hurt, are you? You’re okay, right?”

Allison slowly approached Wil, who kept his sights trained on the colonel. Wil got up. He was covered with dirt.

“I’m fine. I just bumped into a lot of things when I fell.”

“Thank goodness…”

“You can put your gun down now, Wil.” Benedict said. He picked up the submachine gun and slung it over his shoulder. Then he looked at the colonel.

Wil armed the safety on his gun and lowered his hand. He and Allison walked over to Benedict.

“Oh… the fake official…” Allison said, looking down at the fallen man. He was dead, his head covered in blood.

“I shot him. I… I saw them coming inside… and I heard them talking… The fat man over there told the fake official to kill us on sight. So… I did it. I shot him. I… killed him.” Wil whispered, nearly in tears. He looked directly at Allison.

“Allison. I don’t know what the answer is.”

“Oh, Wil…”

Allison reached out her hand towards his back.

“I’m covered in mud, Allison.”

“It’s okay.”

She gently stroked his back.

“Damn you!” Spat Colonel Nott.

“I’ve also shot down two or so crafts. To defend our own lives and the treasure.” Benedict said. Nott scowled.

“So you’ve found it! And now you’re planning to keep it for yourself!”

“Yes and no. That treasure is not something anyone can claim for themselves.” Benedict said, shaking his head.

“Enough of your nonsense, Second Lieutenant Carr! This is an order! Shoot those Roxchean spies this instant! They are *criminals*!”

“…”

Benedict looked at the colonel.

Allison reached for Wil’s gun.

“I refuse, sir.” Benedict replied.

Wil made a point of holstering his gun.

“What is the meaning of this this, Second Lieutenant?! Fine! …Shoot one, and take the other back to do what you wish with them!”

Benedict’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I see, Colonel. Shoot one, eh?”

“Glad to see you’re finally on board.” The colonel grinned.

“Yes. This might sound strange to you, sir, but you’ve just made me feel a lot better.” Benedict said, drawing his handgun.

“That’s right, Second Lieutenant Carr. Shoot!”

“Yes, sir.”

Benedict pulled the trigger.

With the crisp sound of gunfire, a hole was blown through Colonel Nott’s chest.

“Wha…”

Colonel Nott fell limply to the ground, his mouth wide open. His uniform grew damp in the red mist.

“Apologies, Colonel.”

Benedict holstered his gun and looked at Allison and Wil.

“I’m also an accomplice now. I will do *anything* to protect the treasure.”

“Thank you, Second Lieutenant Carr. And about what you said before… I’m sorry.” Allison said, her arm still on Wil’s back.

“…”

“Never mind, then… It’s all right.” Benedict said, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

He then looked back at Allison and Wil.

“Now, what to do with you two? We’re going to have to announce this to both sides at once. Should I send up an emergency flare from the planes? We’ll get help immediately if we do.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Allison nodded.

“Second Lieutenant Carr…” Wil said. “You just said that you’d do anything to protect the treasure, right? Then… I have a favor I want to ask you.”

Benedict nodded.

“That’s right. I did. And I also owe you a debt. What do you need me to do?”

Chapter 8: The World of Two People

Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School was situated between farmlands and plains.

There was a boy sitting on the grass, with his back against the red brick of the school building. The air was humid. Fluffy clouds were passing by in the distant sky.

A group of first-years were sitting the shade of a large tree ahead of him. The boy watched them blankly.

"It was neither! *Neither*! Neither Roxche nor Sou Be-Il was the ancestors!" Cried the tall, middle-aged teacher. "What a find! What a find!"

Drawn on the blackboard was a diagram of the beacon made up of the two emblems.

"When I was your age, I was taught that Sou Be-Il was an evil empire. A bull-headed and proud race in spite of being founded later than Roxche—a people we should subjugate. But that wasn't it! What a find!"

The teacher was holding a newspaper. On the front page was the title, 'Sou Be-Il pilot announces historic discovery to both nations'. Photographs of the mural and 'Second Lieutenant Carr Benedict' also decorated the page.

"It says here that he ended up flying into the Roxche side of the buffer zone by mistake while flying. He then crash-landed due to mechanical trouble, and that was how he came by the murals in the cave. It was such a marvelous discovery that instead of hiding it for himself, he announced it to both sides at the same time. What a heroic act. And—"

Suddenly, Wil heard footsteps approaching. He turned.

"Hey, Wil. Finally out of your bandages, eh?"

It was his classmate, who was being held back for remedial classes.

"Yeah. Wait, are classes finished already?"

"Yeah. The teacher just left the class part of the way through. Said something about listening to the radio broadcast about the mural. Well, I'm happy to get out early. But take a look at that."

Wil's friend gestured at the man teaching the first-years.

"From this point onwards, East and West will co-exist in peace. It's all thanks to this discovery. By the time you graduate from school, you might be able to travel to Sou Be-Il. There's another fascinating article in the papers—the President just announced that they'll be building a bridge between the nations! Don't you think it's incredible? A *bridge* over the Lutoni River! And it says that it'll be opened for service on Lestki Island, where the conflict ten years ago took place. They'll be connecting the two military-use railways on Lestki Island! From this point on, we're going to have to pour our efforts into building good relations with these people who share our origins. And—"

Wil's friend was astonished.

"He's completely changed his tune. Back in third year, the old guy wouldn't stop raving about how Roxche has to rule over Cross-River. Those poor first-years. Now they'll never believe in adults ever again."

"I see… Anyway, it looks like there's a lot of work ahead. For both Roxche and Sou Be-Il."

Wil's friend plopped down on the grass next to him.

"Ah, well. Whatever happens, happens. Anyway, Wil."

"Yeah?"

"Did you go somewhere with that girl? No—*where* did you go with her? For two whole days, even?"

"I told you. We snuck out at night to go camping, and I ended up falling and getting hurt. And then I couldn't move."

"As if I'd believe that, Wil. I'm not as naive as the matron! I bet you did something more exciting! C'mon, buddy. I'm your friend. Be honest. Something not even a five-page reflective essay and two days of hall cleaning duty would excuse! Something that might get you expelled on the spot! I won't tell a soul! C'mon, Wil!"

Wil smiled.

"All right. I'll make an exception for you."

"That's what I'm talking about! So what happened?"

Wil's friend sat up and listened intently.

"Allison and I… we stole an aeroplane and flew into Sou Be-Il. We were chased by a fighter craft and ended up crash-landing, but a Bezelese noblewoman living in the woods helped us out. Then, we infiltrated an army base and wreaked havoc before stealing a fighter plane and escaping. Then we found a heap of gold and silver. I even shot one of the people who came after us, though I don't know if that was the right thing to do. And then, a pilot from Cross-River gave us a ride back to Roxche in the middle of the night. That's how we got back in one piece."

"…"

Wil's friend looked disappointed.

"So it was just a camping trip after all, Wil?

"I told you."

"Man…"

Wil'd friend lay on the grass again and looked up at the sky.

"Never mind. By the way, Wil. What're you planning for summer break? Stay at our place for a while, same as usual? Let's go fishing."

"Maybe. I just want to have a normal summer vacation."

"All right. Don't feel too self-conscious, though. It's great having you at our place! Summer homework is a ton easier with you around. Not because I'm stupid; because you're smart."

"Heh. All right. I'm going to have to go now. It's almost time for the train." Wil said, grinning.

"Huh? So you're the one who signed out the motorcycle? Who're you picking up at—…oh, that girl, right?"

"Yeah." Wil nodded. His friend waved.

"All right. Have fun."

Wil nodded and began to walk.

"Ah, Wil. About that crazy story just now. Did you see it in a book somewhere? Sounds like something I'd like to read sometime."

"Who knows?"

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"Trains are the most *boring* things in the world!" Allison complained at Makkaniu's small train station. She was wearing a plain dark red air force uniform with a necktie. She was carrying a small suitcase.

"And you know what people say to me now? 'Since there won't be any wars from now on, the air force is going to be disbanded'! As if! Flying's not going to end this way, no sir! Start with the army, damn it! The army!"

They climbed onto the motorcycle and the sidecar. Wil drove, leaving the village and going along a narrow country road.

"Wil… you really don't regret anything?" Allison asked.

"No, I don't. But maybe I shouldn't have done what I did, for your sake at least."

"I just stuck with you, so I don't regret it one bit. So don't feel sorry about me. Next time we meet Major Carr, we'll just have to ask him to buy us dinner."

"'Major'? The morning paper said he was a captain."

"I heard it on the radio on the night train. He just got promoted to a major. Apparently he's the youngest major in Sou Be-Il history."

"Must be tough."

"Well, he's the one who said he'd do anything, right? I'm glad we stayed out of the spotlight. Sometimes, if you get promoted, they don't let you on aeroplanes. And…"

“And?”

“If we weren’t out of the spotlight… we wouldn’t be able to relax together like this.” Allison said shyly.

“That’s true.” Wil replied.

After a long drive, they saw a small house in the distance. Allison spoke up.

“Did you end up going?”

“No. This is my first time back. I felt a bit uneasy about going alone…”

It was a little red house made of brick. So small was the building that it probably contained only the bare essentials. In front of the well was a small motorcycle that looked like a bicycle with an engine.

Allison and Wil stepped off the motorcycle without a word.

When the knocked on the door, they heard a woman’s voice.

“Come in.”

“Excuse us.” Wil said, opening the door.

A woman in her late forties was cleaning the room in an apron. There was a teapot and teacups inside a neatly-packed wooden box.

“Oh… it’s you two. I’m afraid the old man won’t be coming back.”

“You’re Norma, right?” Allison asked. The woman nodded.

“Mr. McMillan… he told us to give you his regards. He can’t to that himself anymore, so… so we came in his stead.” Allison said slowly. Norma nodded and offered Allison and Wil a seat.

And.

“So he told you where the mural was, didn’t he? And you went to find it with a trustworthy Sou Be-Il pilot.”

Norma said with a smile. Allison was shocked.

“So… you knew? You knew everything…?” Wil asked.

“Of course. That man never lied to me.”

“I see… I get it. After we found the murals, we left the announcement to the pilot. Would you like to hear how everything happened?”

Norma shook her head.

"No, it's all right. I'm sure that man can rest in peace now. He always used to say—when the time came for the murals to be revealed, he would already be gone. He probably took his own life after leaving things to the two of you."

"But why…? Why couldn't he announce the discovery himself when the time was right? I don't understand." Allison said.

Do you know why that man returned alone from his mission during the war?" Norma asked. Wil and Allison looked at one another and shook their heads.

"I see… then let me tell you. That man—Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillain—shot and killed his own men. Right after the poison gas attack."

"…!"

"Wh, why…?!"

"I see. His subordinates must have seen the murals, too." Wil commented. Norma nodded.

"That's correct."

Allison looked at Wil. He continued.

"The subordinates must have thought, 'we don't need to get along with Sou Be-Il. Let's destroy the mural'."

"That's right. Apparently they were just about ready to throw grenades at it."

"The old man—Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan—he must have wanted to protect the mural, so he ended up—"

"Yes. He always regretted what he did. He probably killed the men in a moment of panic. But he always wondered if there could have been another way. If that really was the right thing to do. He used to weep sometimes, calling the names of his subordinates one by one. So he swore he would never announce the discovery himself. He told me everything, and left me with the decision of what to do if he died. But sometimes, he couldn't bear the burden of that secret alone. That's when he told other people while disguising it as a lie. He told all sorts of tall tales, mixing in the true story about the treasure sometimes."

"…"

"…"

"I asked him once—what would he do if someone actually believed his story? He told me that if the person was interesting, he would tell them where to find the treasure. If not, he would just make up another lie. I suppose he must have taken a liking to the two of you."

"Yeah." Allison nodded, smiling.

"Thank you for taking the time to come see me. I'm going to leave this house now, too. And I'm not going to blame the two of you for what happened. But I suppose I'll miss waltzing with him to the radio broadcast next week… although I can't imagine he would have been any good."

Norma smiled.

Wil stood.

“Thank you for having us over. Thank you for telling us everything.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t serve you anything.”

“Not at all. Let’s go, Allison.”

“Yeah…”

Allison and Wil walked over to the door. Suddenly, Wil stopped. Allison nearly bumped into him.

“Ms. Norma. There’s one thing I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“If Mr. McMillan died here… what would you have done? Would you have announced the discovery?”

Norma smiled gently.

“Who knows?”

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About four kilometers south of the school was a lake and a wetland.

Groundwater from the Central Mountain Range created a lake in a large hollow in the plains, which was surrounded by a marsh.

There was a motorcycle parked by the docks, where several boats were moored. Wil stood next to the motorcycle, looking out at the lake. Allison was standing next to him.

“It really is a beautiful place.”

“Oh, one more thing. I just got this in the mail today.” Wil said, holding out a postcard. It was international mail that had been put through customs. The sender was Travas Ladia, and the address was somewhere in the capital of Sfrestus.

The contents of the message were short.

[I heard everything from the pilot. Please come back to return what you borrowed. P.S. This time, we’ll have them roasted whole.]

“Roasted whole? What’s she talking about?” Allison asked.

“The potatoes we’re having for breakfast.” Wil answered.

Allison chuckled and returned the postcard to Wil.

"All right. Let's go to Sfrestus sometime."

"Didn't you get into trouble, Allison?"

"Hm? Oh, about my badge of rank. Yeah, I did. They even docked my pay. 40% for three months."

"I see…"

"But everyone in my unit said I did good. They said that the captain's the only one in the unit who hasn't gotten into trouble now. And they didn't take away my flying privileges, either."

"…Isn't coming here today considered 'getting into trouble'?"

"It's all right. I'm just dropping by for a quick visit."

"Wait a second…"

Wil looked up at the sky. Four seaplanes were flying in formation. They were biplanes with a pair of floats underneath. One of the planes suddenly descended rapidly, passing over their heads. On the side of the frame was the Spear of Seron. Hand-written under the emblem were the words, 'Not to pierce, but to illuminate'.

The seaplane circled the air before finally coming to a stop on the lake. Allison took out her jacket and aviator's hat and put them on.

The plane made a showy swerve and stopped at the edge of the docks.

"Thanks, Wil. I'll come visit again."

"Any time, Allison. But make sure you contact me ahead of time."

"Okay. See you later."

With that, Allison ran over to the docks. Halfway through, she turned and waved to Wil.

Jumping onto the floats, Allison climbed into the back seat. Soon, the engine roared again as the seaplane taxied along the water before taking to the skies.

Wil watched the seaplanes until they disappeared into the distance.

He then returned to his motorcycle and started the engine.

Wil lazily rode his motorcycle on the road through the plains.

The sky was a clear azure. The smooth earth was covered in green.

In the distance loomed the Central Mountain Range. Some of its great peaks were still capped with snow.

When the winds began to blow in from the south, summer would arrive upon this land in full force.

-**To be continued in Volume II**-